



*“The More You Carry In Your Head,  
The Less You Carry On Your Back”*

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## **What is Earth Skills Education?**

Earth Skills Education recognizes that there is inherent value in learning and understanding the skills of how to live in the natural world because it is, and has always been, our home.

The goal of Earth Skills Education (ESE) is to teach and pass on the life skills of our forefathers. For more than 99% of human history, our species lived as small groups of hunter-gatherers in intimate contact with the land. Such skills and knowledge were not restricted to a portion of humanity; it existed everywhere amongst all races and cultures. The skills, techniques, and knowledge of the natural world were passed from generation to generation. But our modern world has abandoned both this knowledge and the idea of passing it on to future generations. Skills that were once common are now rare. For example, matches weren't invented until 1827, but today there are few who can light a fire without them.

Earth Skills Education as a discipline is new, and has not yet been widely recognized by the general public due to a lack of proper descriptive terminology and segmented understanding of what it entails. The terms that have fallen under its umbrella over time are many, including traditional wilderness living skills, wilderness survival, bushcraft, living off the land, primitive skills, indigenous skills, woodlore, and countless more. Many of these terms carry cultural baggage and are associated with stereotypes of unenlightened savages and paramilitary organizations, among other things, and as such they have hindered the acceptance and understanding of this type of educational experience. What has been lacking is a general term to refer to the many disciplines that represent the life skills of our hunter/gatherer and early agricultural forefathers that isn't specific to one group of people. This lack brought about the beginning of Earth Skills Education as a term and an academic discipline.

While Earth Skills Education has some things in common with both Environmental and Outdoor Education it is a fundamentally different discipline. Outdoor education seeks to use the natural world as a vehicle for personal and group development. Environmental Education seeks to teach people about the environment as if we were removed from it. Both of these disciplines seek to separate us from the natural world, while Earth Skills Education encourages immersion into it. It has been our home since our species originated, and knowing how to live in it without harming it is a critically needed skill in this day and age.

The teaching of ESE has historically fallen under the heading of wilderness survival skills training, while at the same time outdoor education and environmental education professionals have defined their disciplines by using the term "education". Thus the difference between training and education becomes relevant to defining ESE as a discipline. The World Book Dictionary defines training as "practical education in some art, profession, or occupation." It defines education as "the development of knowledge, skill, ability, or character by teaching, training, study, or experience". Thus training usually refers solely to practical matters and is a component of education, while education is characterized by a broader, more intellectual experience concerned equally with concepts and ideas as it is with practical matters. Although the disciplines associated with Earth Skills Education have historically been associated with training, through running numerous semester-length courses it has evolved into an educational form that embraces educational theory and is concerned with both practical skills and philosophic applications of its core principles. By training students to achieve a level of minimum competency with the material, such as being able to start a fire by friction or identify and follow a set of tracks, they are empowered to expand their ideas regarding what is possible. This is then used to construct a broader educational framework, where the skills, accomplishments, and experiences facilitate communicating broad-scale concepts and ideas that provide insight into a holistic view of the natural world and our role as participants in, and stewards of, it. Similarly, learning how to make items necessary for daily life from materials on the landscape creates an exit strategy from the dominant modern culture, allowing students to understand, and in some cases replicate, how our forefathers lived off of what the Earth provided.

Currently there are no certifying agencies or degrees offered in Earth Skills Education. As an educational movement it is comprised of numerous teachers, both formally educated and not, passing on what they know. The past few years have seen the inception of a successful semester-length ESE course, and a second, independent semester ESE course is scheduled to begin this fall (2004). There are also schools around the world teaching the skills of the past to a new generation through workshops of various lengths. Interest in this type of educational programming has grown dramatically in recent years, and continued interest and growth is expected.

While newly recognized as a form of modern education, ESE is the oldest of all educational endeavors. It is a tangible link to our shared human history, and offers students unmatched opportunities for understanding and living in the natural world.