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The Earth Education Program Sunship™ Earth: A Mixed Methods Study of the Long-Term Influence on Environmental Attitudes and Actions

Nancy K. Bires

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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THE EARTH EDUCATION PROGRAM SUNSHIPTM EARTH:
A MIXED METHODS STUDY OF THE LONG-TERM INFLUENCE ON
ENVIRONMENTAL ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Nancy K. Bires

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania
School of Graduate Studies and Research
Department of Professional Studies in Education

We hereby approve the dissertation of

Nancy K. Bires

Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Education

Meghan Twiest, Ph.D.
Professor of Education, Advisor

Mary R. Jalongo, Ph.D.
Professor of Education

Valeri R. Helterbran, Ed.D.
Professor of Education

ACCEPTED

Timothy P. Mack, Ph.D.
Dean
School of Graduate Studies and Research

Title: The Earth Education Program Sunship™ Earth: A Mixed Methods Study of the Long-Term Influence on Environmental Attitudes and Actions

Author: Nancy K. Bires

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Meghan Twiest

Dissertation Committee Members: Dr. Mary R. Jalongo
Dr. Valeri R. Helterbran

There have been a limited number of studies on the short-term influence of environmental and earth education programs, however, not much information is available about the long-term influence of these programs on participants' environmental attitudes and actions. This mixed methods study explores the long-term influence of the earth education program Sunship Earth on environmental attitudes and actions of adults who participated in the program as children 6 to 31 years earlier. Sixth-grade students from a Western Pennsylvania community have been participating in the Sunship Earth program since 1981. Sunship Earth is a five-day residential program developed by the Institute for Earth Education for children between 10 and 11 years of age. Earth education programs are designed to help students construct broad-based ecological understandings, develop positive feelings for the natural world, and undertake personal actions to lessen their impact on the planet (Johnson & Manoli, 2008, 2011; Van Matre 1990). The Sunship Earth program focuses on seven ecological concepts and takes place in a natural area away from school where students have the opportunity to experience nature first hand. Special activities focusing on discovery, observation, solitude and immersion are designed to help students appreciate the natural world.

The first phase of the study investigated the environmental attitudes and actions of adults in a community in which many had participated in the program as sixth grade students. The Environment Questionnaire (TEQ), developed by Johnson and Manoli (2008), was used to

measure respondents' environmental attitudes. Comparisons were made between those who had participated in the program and those living in the same area who did not participate in the program as children. Phase two, the qualitative part of the study consisted of interviews with 10 purposefully selected adults who participated in the program in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the influences of the program on their environmental attitudes and actions. Results of this study suggest that the Sunship Earth program did have a positive influence on environmental attitudes and actions of participants and the influence was sustained over the long-term.