Why an Urban Ecology Center?

An Urban Ecology Center (UEC) is an environmental community center model that, once activated in a urban neighborhood green space, contributes to crime reduction in adjacent parks, increased academic achievement of students, new jobs and job training, an explosion of volunteerism, increased value of neighborhood and city property, and an influx of community resources and engagement. A UEC restores the ecology of the land, instills love of nature, improves a neighborhood’s environmental awareness, and is a catalyst for social change.

The Urban Ecology Center, first in its founding Riverside Park location, then in Washington Park, and then in Menomonee Valley – three unique neighborhoods in Milwaukee – have all experienced the same results. The good news is that this can happen for you too.

“As more and more children are growing up in cities, teaching land stewardship and nature conservation to children and their families is critical. I am excited by Urban Ecology as it puts forth a practical blueprint for how to do this well. Urban Ecology shares the story of a model that has been perfected in three unique urban neighborhoods in Milwaukee, is being modeled in other cities in the United States, and is beginning to spread to cities across the globe.”

Jane Goodall, PhD, DBE Founder-the Jane Goodall Institute & UN Messenger of Peace

“The Urban Ecology Center has transformed the greenspace around the Milwaukee River into the best urban wilderness in the world. It connects the people of Milwaukee to flowing water, to the seasons, and to each other.”

-Milwaukee Alderman Nik Kovac
Why attend the Intensive?

Curriculum is built upon the book *Urban Ecology: A Natural Way to Transform Kids, Parks, Cities, and the World*, written by Executive Director Ken Leinbach. The book was created for those looking to make change in their neighborhoods and communities. If you take a trip to Milwaukee, you can see options for engaging a neighborhood in a very practical way by visiting our environmental community centers set up across the city. However, there are many more layers of transformation embedded in the Urban Ecology Center programming and operations model, and those less obvious layers will be fully explored in the 4-day Intensive.

"I loved the book because it was almost a manual for me on how to build my non-profit even though our cause has nothing to do with ecology."
Ashley Schneider, founder of Milwaukee non-profit MS run the US

"Ken, I just finished reading your book. Wow! What you are doing in the non-profit field is badly needed in the for-profit field as well! What if we started to see doing business as symbiotic relationships where whole ecosystems of business, suppliers, and consumers grow in a sustainable win-win way? Your wording ‘secret sauce’ is a beautiful way to capture the unique culture of UEC. This ‘secret sauce’ was dripping from the book beginning to end."
Dolf Van Den Brink, CEO of Heineken Mexico
The book is just the starting point. The Intensive is much more. Over the course of 4 days, you will benefit from our 20+ years of experience, experimentation, failures, and successes. This is not a one-size-fits-all model. Its transformational power comes from a process of exploring possibilities and building partnerships around a shared vision of ecologically and socially restored urban spaces.

As a systems thinking and learning organization, the Urban Ecology Center has a unique and incredibly effective way of role modeling and teaching.

Ken Leinbach and Beth Heller are sought after leaders in the field, leading systems change workshops through Society of Organizational Learning (SOL) and coaching other professionals through the Academy for Systems Change, an international NGO dedicated to the development of leaders across the globe. Ken, Beth, and other staff have worked as consultants for the Association of Nature Center Administrators (ANCA), an international non-profit organization promoting leadership and quality management for nature and environmental learning centers.

Ken Leinbach is an inspirational speaker and consultant, and a nationally recognized science educator and leader. He has received the St. Mark A.M.E. Church’s Martin Luther King Jr.; Green Non-Profit Leader of the Year from the Milwaukee Business Journal; National Nature Educator of the Year Award from the Roger Tory Peterson Institute, Jamestown, New York; Thomas Jefferson Medal for Outstanding Contributions to Natural Science Education for Virginia.


Beth Heller graduated from Lawrence University with a B.A. degree in Biology and Education. Beth earned her MBA from University Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 2005. She is a committee chair and volunteer with the Rotary Club of Milwaukee, served as a leader in the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce’s FUEL Milwaukee.

Beth has been awarded the Business Journal Forty under 40 Award for Community Leadership; 2008 Blanche Hornbeck Award from the Roger Tory Peterson Institute of Natural History for Leaders in Nature Education; Business Plan Award for Best in New Ventures for the UEC’s Washington Park Branch; named Conservation Educator of the Year by the Wisconsin Conservation Congress.

Urban Ecology Center’s Contributions in the Field of Environmental Education

- Milwaukee Award for Neighborhood Development Innovation (MANDI).
- Commendation from the Centers for Disease Control listing UEC as one of the 20 best practices nationwide as a way to get kids outside and active.
- 2014 BizTimes Nonprofit Excellence Awards: Nonprofit Collaboration of the Year Award Winner.
- WI Green Building Alliance Transformation Award.
- Neighborhood Environmental Education Program was selected by the National Environmental Education Advancement Project as one of the most unique and effective programs in the state of Wisconsin.
Why It’s Important to Visit

When people visit, the possibility and power of the Urban Ecology Center model clicks - the overall impact is greater than all its pieces. In fact, the sense you get when you walk into one of our buildings is being studied by experts at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

“Thank you again for such a wonderful and inspiring visit last week...I’m enjoying reading Ken’s book, and just like being at the Urban Ecology Center in person, there are beautiful stories and experiences. Those stories resonate with me here in Chicago, which is reaffirming. I also really appreciated learning about new educational resources, business models, ideas, and authors that support the work with communities, teaching, with each other and how it can encourage and cultivate growth. All of this certainly helped shape and give me new perspective.” Visitors from Chicago Parks District

Why Bring a Team to the Intensive?

Setting up an Urban Ecology Center is no small feat. It requires a team effort to build both the program and the support needed to make it fly. While personal learning will happen within the context of the intensive, the goal is to successfully catalyze and inspire the formation of Urban Ecology Centers in other cities. Our experience tells us it will require a team effort. For this reason we have priced the workshop to attract teams of people from different cities, rather than individuals. Political, park, educational, and other community leadership is necessary.

"If you want to do something fast, do it alone. If you want to do something that lasts, do it together." (Anonymous)
A Note about Cost

For some, this intensive will seem expensive, for others, it is a deal. It all depends on one’s base for comparison. The price is set where it is, with intention, for four reasons:

1) The instructors have been doing this work for many years (decades in some cases) and will be teaching from this practical experience. The intensive experience is crafted by master teachers who will maximize learning through a number of well researched learning modalities. In short – you are getting the best instructors in the field of urban environmental education.

2) We are looking for people who are serious about the potential of establishing a Center. We want participants to learn from each other as much as from our instructors. Joining this intensive is a commitment – a commitment that will only add to the quality of experience for all involved. Individuals’ acceptance will be based on the seriousness of their commitment conveyed through their application.

3) Creating a Center is an entrepreneurial venture and requires a whole menu of creative methods to take it from an idea to a reality, and this learning starts now! It's an investment. With this in mind, we are here to help. When you apply, share the state of your fundraising with us. If fundraising may be a challenge, we are happy to share tips and tricks that we have learned over the years to fund programs like this one from within your community. We work from a philosophy of abundance. It works.

4) If you are invested in learning at the Intensive, we think your learning – from topics regarding raising money to strategic partnerships – will multiply its financial value to you, and support your vision. Since its inception, the UEC model in Milwaukee has conservatively brought more than $40 million in investment dollars to the city’s parks. During this same time approximately $32 million has been raised from the community to support the jobs associated with the Center. We know how to do this work. Attend the Intensive and you will too.

Worth noting are some ways to keep costs down: First, while flying into Milwaukee’s Mitchel International Airport (MKE) is easy and generally not too expensive, flying into Chicago O’Hare (ORD), is often even cheaper. Coach buses travel back and forth hourly.

We also have a series of housing option, one of which is camping - for free! We will also offer home stays as we’re able. AirBnB and hotel options will also be available.

Questions we haven’t answered? Please reach out to intensive@urbanecologycenter.org

“Community doesn’t just create abundance – community is abundance. If we could learn that equation from the world of nature, the human world might be transformed.” Parker Palmer