

2026 Massachusetts Envirothon Community Engagement Award Research & Action Checklist

The Community Engagement Award recognizes your team's research and action related to the Mass Envirothon Current Issue. The award is optional and noncompetitive. To qualify for the award, your team must

- Work together to complete the **Checklist** and submit it by end of the day, Thursday May 14
- Complete the Community Engagement Award **Registration** and submit it by end of the day, Thursday May 14
- Bring yourselves and examples of your experiences to a **zoom interview** with a small group of Envirothon volunteers during the week of the Envirothon competition. This will be arranged when your checklist and registration have been submitted.

[Details for certifying and submitting your Community Engagement Award](#)

The 2026 Current Issue: Living Sponge Communities!

Water is all around us – falling, flowing, pooling, infiltrating, evaporating, transpiring – throughout the built and natural environments of our communities. This water cycle is natural and essential for life!

Unfortunately:

- More buildings and pavement can mean that more water runs off rather than soaking into the ground.
- Pollutants from human activity on the landscape (called non-point source or NPS pollution) are carried by runoff, and can pollute surface and ground water in urban, suburban, and rural settings.
- Climate change brings more precipitation and more intense rain events that lead to flooding and erosion.

Fortunately:

- Stormwater management – using both gray (engineered) infrastructure and especially GREEN infrastructure – can reduce flood risk and filter out pollutants effectively.
- Green stormwater infrastructure, planned well, can provide ADDITIONAL ecosystem services, including a home for thriving, biodiverse plant and animal communities. We benefit in many ways.

These "living sponge communities" are the focus of our Current Issue research this year!

More information on:

[The 2026 Current Issue: Living Sponge Communities](#)

Here is an outline of the RESEARCH and ACTION tasks on this Checklist:

RESEARCH

1. Places - Become familiar with at least three local sites with living sponge significance.
2. People - Interview at least three people involved with stormwater, green infrastructure, and/or climate.
3. Projects & Initiatives - Get to know two living sponge projects that are planned, underway, or completed.
4. Special Interest Research - Take a deeper dive into an area that interests you!
5. Summary - State the main points you make in your Current Issue presentation at the Envirothon.

ACTION!

6. Describe what you are doing with what you have learned - For example: Sharing with a wider audience or working on a community project.
7. Community partner - Include a letter or email from someone beyond your school who can attest to your efforts.

Questions? Contact Will Snyder, wsnyder@umass.edu or 413/387-2371.

Name of your School/Organization/Team

Name of the municipality(ies) you are researching

RESEARCH

This is your chance to show that your investigations have been wide-ranging and thoughtful. The checklist allows YOU to choose the direction and depth of your research. You may decide to pursue your own tasks that take you deeper, or in different directions. If your team departs from this checklist, be ready to make your case for how your work qualifies for the award.

1. PLACES: How should you choose the places you will get to know in your living sponge investigations? Look for examples (or combinations) of:

- Natural sponges - Ecosystems with soils and vegetation that naturally capture and slowly release water from
- Human-built sponges - Gray stormwater management infrastructure (often with green infrastructure components) that collects stormwater and allows it to infiltrate, minimizing off-site discharges.
- Living sponge opportunities: Places where a green infrastructure project might reduce runoff, improve water quality, and enhance other ecosystem services

Consider:

- Likely sources of non-point source (NPS) pollution.
- Streams that drain watershed areas with lots of impervious surface.
- Gray infrastructure that is working well (or not so well) in capturing stormwater.
- Plant and animal communities that are already there!
- Designs for commercial and residential development and roads that reduce off-site stormwater discharge.
- Places where stormwater projects and initiatives are underway or recently completed.
- Other kinds and quality of ecosystem services that are present.

Tips for getting to know a place:

- Locate it on a map. How big is it? What's the topography? What is its relationship to the watershed?
- Visit more than once.
- Visit with a guide who knows it well.
- Investigate the OTHER natural resources (soil, wildlife, forest) resources and human history of the site.
- Visit during an extreme precipitation event.

We became familiar with (at least) THREE local areas with "living sponge" significance for our community:

Area #1

Place name (if any)

Use a mapping app or cell phone to get latitude & longitude.

Latitude:

Longitude:

In a brief paragraph, describe the place and its importance in the watershed, including size, drainage patterns, soils/impervious surfaces, presence of water, water quality, other ecosystem services it represents.

What is the "living sponge" problem or opportunity you discovered here? Describe any actions YOU think should be taken.

Area #2

Place name (if any)

Use a mapping app or cell phone to get latitude & longitude.

Latitude:

Longitude:

In a brief paragraph, describe the place and its importance in the watershed, including size, drainage patterns, soils/impervious surfaces, presence of water, water quality, other ecosystem services it represents.

What is the "living sponge" problem or opportunity you discovered here? Describe any actions YOU think should be taken.

Area #3

Place name (if any)

Use a mapping app or cell phone to get latitude & longitude.

Latitude:

Longitude:

In a brief paragraph, describe the place and its importance in the watershed, including size, drainage patterns, soils/impervious surfaces, presence of water, water quality, other ecosystem services it represents.

What is the "living sponge" problem or opportunity here? Describe any actions YOU think should be taken.

2. PEOPLE: There are more people than you may expect who have knowledge and informed opinions about stormwater, climate, and green infrastructure in your community! For many, working with these issues is officially part of their job.

First-hand connections with people are likely to be your BEST sources of information about local issues. Use them to introduce you to local places and sponge community questions. Also use them to check information that you read on the internet. **More people interviewed = a more well-rounded perspective on living sponge community questions!**

Who are these people, and where can you find them? What perspectives, skills and knowledge, and goals do they have? How did they come to do what they are doing - what experiences and education do they bring?

Town government and regional organizations - Who has responsibility for stormwater management, resilience planning, and conservation? Some possible starting points:

- Municipal Conservation Commission (or the Conservation Agent who works for them)
- Municipal Board of Health
- Municipal Planning Board
- Municipal Department of Public Works (DPW)
- Regional Planning Agencies
- Watershed associations

Businesses and individuals:

- Engineers
- Landscape architects
- Urban/regional planners
- Soil Scientists
- Wetland scientists and hydrologists
- Environmental Justice advocates
- Farmers and Foresters

- Long time residents

Some tips for PEOPLE connections:

- Ask about MORE than their stormwater/living sponge connection. Get to know them: What path(s) did they take to get here? What do they enjoy about this work? Why do they care?
- Find out what ORGANIZATIONS are involved locally and regionally in this work. What are their "theories of change" and "theories of action"?
- One resource person can lead to another!
- Interviews by video link can work nearly as well as in-person, and can be easier to arrange

We interviewed (at least) THREE people working on living sponge questions in our community, representing a wide range of roles, backgrounds, and perspectives (These people may be listed in other places in this checklist, as well. Collect the following information about each person):

Name #1

Organizational affiliation (if any)

Contact phone or email

Their expertise or special interests and what they do day-to-day related to living sponge community questions

Name #2

Organizational affiliation (if any)

Contact phone or email

Their expertise or special interests and what they do day-to-day related to living sponge community questions

Name #3

Organizational affiliation (if any)

Contact phone or email

Their expertise or special interests and what they do day-to-day related to living sponge community questions

3. PROJECTS & INITIATIVES

What examples can you find that show how your town or city or region is working together to become a better living sponge community? One good way is by becoming familiar with projects and initiatives that are happening locally. These projects and initiatives:

- may be large or small. See if you can find projects that demonstrate an array of "sponge" strategies.
- may be underway, or recently completed, or just in the planning stages.
- don't have to be actual places. They can be policies or public education campaigns.

How do you find a project or initiative?

- These projects will not necessarily be called "living sponge community" projects.
- Look for words like "stormwater" and "climate resilience" and "green infrastructure"
- Ask your PEOPLE contacts.
- One good starting point: The Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness program. Has your town/city applied?
[Massachusetts' Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness \(MVP\) Program](#)

How do you get to know a project or initiative?

- Interview a person who is involved in some way.
- Look for stories about it in the media.
- Find the official documents/plans that describe it.
- Visit the site, if there is one!

We found the following TWO projects/initiatives with living sponge implications that are planned, underway, or recently completed in our community:

Project #1 Name

A short paragraph on WHAT/WHERE: Location, size, description

A short paragraph on WHY: What is the purpose? What problems will it solve? What area will it affect? How much water is involved?

A short paragraph on HOW: Describe the major project activities. Include timetable and costs where relevant

This person (include name and organization, if any) was especially helpful as we researched this project.

Project #2 Name

A short paragraph on WHAT/WHERE: Location, size, description

A short paragraph on WHY: What is the purpose? What problems will it solve? What area will it affect? How much water is involved?

A short paragraph on HOW: Describe the major project activities. Include timetable and costs where relevant

This person (include name and organization, if any) was especially helpful as we researched this project.

This person (include name and organization, if any) was especially helpful as we researched this project.



4. SPECIAL INTEREST RESEARCH. Beyond getting to know people, places, and projects in your community, take a deeper dive into a special interest area that you have discovered along the way. This could be one of the topics below, or a combination, or a question of your own. Maybe you would like to circle back to learn from one of the resource people you met, or revisit a place with new questions. Maybe you would like to investigate a different area of sponge community issues. It's up to you!

Special Interest Research has good potential to develop into action projects (See 6 below) that inform and/or benefit your community.

We undertook a special interest research project (Pick one below or invent your own, then describe what you did):

a. Water quality

Choose one kind of non-point source water pollution that is present in your watershed. Get to know it well: sources, amounts, fate and transport. Are there any organized efforts to monitor water quality for this pollutant? Any remediation efforts? When is it a problem? How might green infrastructure help?

b. Maps

Use maps to get to know your watershed. Determine where the water in your neighborhood comes from and where it goes, including surface water and groundwater flows. How does human infrastructure (e.g. roads, dams, culverts, impervious surfaces) affect natural flow? What is the potential and history of flooding? Make a map that shows what you think people need to know about the sponginess of your community.

c. Environmental Justice

Are stormwater and nonpoint source pollution problems affecting different groups of people differently, within your community or between your community and others? What are the EJ issues? Are they being addressed? Who is working on them? Can ideas from your living sponge research help to create a more just and sustainable future right in your own community?

d. Water budget

Delineate an area (e.g. your school property or a local shopping mall) and estimate: How much precipitation falls on this area? How much impervious surface area is there? How much runoff? How much and what combination of gray and green infrastructure would it take to keep all normal rainfall from leaving the site as surface flow? Consider landscaping, soil amendments, plant species and communities, etc.

e. Green infrastructure

Focus on one of your "sponge opportunity" sites. What plant and animal communities currently make this their home, and what ecosystem services do they provide? What kinds of gray and green infrastructure technology and design would be best for addressing stormwater issues here? What impact would these changes have on biodiversity? Is there a way to manage stormwater AND enhance biodiversity and other ecosystem services? Get to know the pros and cons of each of your recommendations so you could answer hard questions from the people who will pay for it.

f. History

Where were the sponge community elements in your area 100, 200, 500 years ago? What is the history of flooding? How did human activities affect water quantity and quality? What role did plant and animal communities play? What vestiges of this past remain today? What ecological services should we attempt to restore?

g. OR some combination of the ideas above OR a special interest research project of your own design!

Whichever path you chose (a.-g. above) DESCRIBE your Special Interest Research and what you found in 3-4 sentences. Be sure to mention any community resource people or organizations you worked with. Include photos or documents that help to tell the story when you register for the Community Engagement Award.

5. QUICK SUMMARY OF YOUR ENVIROTHON PRESENTATION. Below, summarize the main point (s) of your Mass Envirothon Current Issue presentation in 3-4 sentences:

ACTION!

Action projects can be as simple as sharing the findings of your special interest research in a letter to the editor or to a decision maker, or making your Current Issue presentation to an audience you would like to influence beyond the Envirothon. Many forms of action are possible: sharing your scientific research, community education (e.g. making and sharing a video, or organizing a public event), participating in an ongoing stewardship project you learned about, meeting with decision-makers to express your views, and more. Teams can plug into an existing community effort or develop a project of their own.

[See these Action Resources!](#)

6. TELL THE WORLD HOW YOU ARE TAKING ACTION BASED ON WHAT YOU FOUND IN YOUR RESEARCH:

* Best approach: Write and attach a brief news release about your project and/or provide a link to photos and other documents about the work.

* At least: Write a paragraph below presenting the basic facts of your project: who, what, when, where, how, and why.



7. YOUR COMMUNITY CONNECTION(S)

- **EITHER** (best approach): Provide a copy of a letter or email from a community partner outside Your school about the action you have chosen to take.

[Here are some tips for how to ask for a letter](#)

Letter writer's name:

Position/Organization:

Letter writer's email address:

- **OR:** Provide a different form of evidence (Please describe):