



Elena Takaki (1971-Present)

**Environmental Education Specialist
North American Association for
Environmental Education**

“To minorities and non-minorities alike, just make sure you choose a path that you feel is personally and professionally fulfilling.” Elena Takaki, 2004.

Overview

Elena is EE Specialist for NAAEE, where she works on EE Capacity initiatives, including building state capacity, Guidelines for Community Engagement, and Community Climate Change. Prior to coming to NAAEE, Elena was the Program Manager for National Geographic’s Chesapeake Bay FieldScope program and the co-lead staff for Maryland’s Partnership for Children in Nature at Maryland DNR. With a B.S. in Natural Resource Management (Environmental Education concentration) from the University of Michigan, Elena has had the privilege of working with Dr. Bill Stapp, who has profoundly influenced her life and career. Additionally, she has a M.A. in Science Education from the University of Michigan and a M.S. in Environmental Science from Johns Hopkins University. Prior to working at National Geographic, Elena worked at the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, Johns Hopkins University, and the University of Michigan. In her spare time, Elena is training to be a teacher of hula.

This interview was conducted in 2015.

Early Life and Education

Elena Takaki was born on October 15, 1971 to Karen Whitcher and James Takaki in Plymouth, Michigan. As a child, Takaki loved to ride horses – an activity which allowed her to appreciate the outdoors. After high school, she attended the University of Michigan for both her bachelor’s degree in natural resource policy and behavior and master’s degree in educational studies and environmental science. Takaki first became interested in an environmental career when she wrote a paper on recycling in one of her first undergraduate environmental courses. That essay sparked her interest in other aspects of environmental preservation and led her to transfer from the College of Literature, Science and Arts to the School of Natural Resources and Environment (SNRE).

Career

Takaki's first job in the environmental field was working for the National Wildlife Federation's (NWF) Midwest Campus Ecology Program. She worked with faculty, staff and students on various services aimed at improving the environment on their campuses. In Illinois, she worked with a student group that began promoting Integrated Pest Management (IPM) at their agriculture-based school. At the University of Minnesota-Duluth, she collaborated with a student group and purchasing department staff to centralize the university's chemical purchasing process. As a result of this project, the hazardous chemicals used on the campus were tracked and controlled more effectively. Takaki has also worked with other student groups to help start recycling programs.

Today, Takaki continues to work with students and teachers on environmental solutions as the Director of Education for the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. She originally applied for a job as a Tributary Team Coordinator, but during the job interview, the employer mentioned the possibility of her obtaining a position in the education department. Takaki's qualifications and skills were better suited for the post, so she decided to apply for it; looking back, she is glad that she made that decision and hopes that her work can inspire others to learn more about the environment and to preserve it. Takaki has been actively involved with diversity efforts as well, and has developed an environmental justice curriculum related to smart-growth issues, reinvesting in communities, brown field development, and sprawl. She currently teaches workshops to promote this curriculum. Through the program TEAM (Teaching Environmental Awareness in Maryland), she and other advisors teach volunteers about the ecology of the Chesapeake Bay. In addition, hands-on activities are conducted with students from grades 2 through 8. One such program in TEAM is called the Chesapeake Watermen; it focuses on the careers and lives of watermen and the way their activities are connected to the lives of those living in and around the Chesapeake Bay. By participating in the program, students are given the opportunity to hear stories and poetry written by black watermen, create their own menus for a restaurant and enact a "typical day" in the life of a waterman. Takaki believes that there is a great need to understand the contributions of minorities to the Chesapeake Bay economy and their investment in a healthy Chesapeake Bay ecosystem.

Importance of Mentoring to Career

Takaki credits two mentors with helping her get to where she is today. Bill Stapp, she says, was an example of what could be accomplished through dedication and commitment. Takaki's graduate student advisor, Joe Krajcik, was also helpful in giving her guidance in her career path. She continues to apply what they taught her in her work today. For those considering a career in the environmental field, she advises minorities and non-minorities alike to "make sure you choose a path that you feel is personally and professionally fulfilling."

For More Information

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