



YMCA GREEN NETWORK - NORTH AMERICA



Shine On



WORLD
YMCA

www.YMCAGreenSpace.org

Environmental Sustainability Toolkit

Green Practices to improve operational
efficiency and build a more sustainable future





Welcome to the Sustainability Toolkit

Developed by a group of YMCAs in North America, utilizing this toolkit will help you build green practices, resulting in improved operational efficiency and a more sustainable future.

There are increasing opportunities for YMCAs to improve operational efficiency and green practices. Many YMCAs are facing new local government regulations, incentives and/or mandates as well as requests to develop resilience hubs to prepare for and respond to disasters. With aging facilities and rising costs, Y leaders are looking to make facilities more efficient and lower costs.

Additionally, stakeholders, including young people, who are passionate about sustainability are asking Ys to make greener choices. Y leaders are seeking supports to assist in these efforts through resources, inter-Y sharing as well as funding, partnerships and government supports.

This Toolkit is designed to meet you and your Y where you are, offering options so that you can choose what makes sense for you. We acknowledge there are a variety of perspectives on environmental sustainability and the Y's role in sustaining a healthy planet. Whether you are looking for a place to start or working to strengthen existing efforts, this Toolkit will provide you with an assessment and actions you can take as well as connect you to a network of Y leaders with additional supports and resources.

For our purposes, sustainability is simply meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.*

* Adapted from **Our Common Future**: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development

IMPACT

for YMCAs and Communities

Throughout history, the YMCA has responded to the most pressing needs in communities across the globe. Today, one of the top concerns, especially for young people, is ensuring a healthy planet for future generations.

This is not new work for the YMCA. For over 100 years, YMCA camps have promoted environmental stewardship and outdoor education, connecting young people and families with nature. We focus on energy and resource efficiency for our facilities and sites, and we help communities through difficult times, including environmental emergencies such as floods, fires, tornados and freezes.

The green economy presents opportunities to evolve YMCA programs. Afterschool and teen programs that include Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) curriculum, of which environmental science and new green technology are part of advances in innovation. Workforce development programs are incorporating a green focus – green energy jobs grew at double the rate of job growth in the rest of the economy (U.S. Dept. of Energy) and growth in demand for green skills is outpacing the increase in supply across the globe (LinkedIn Global Green Skills Report 2023).

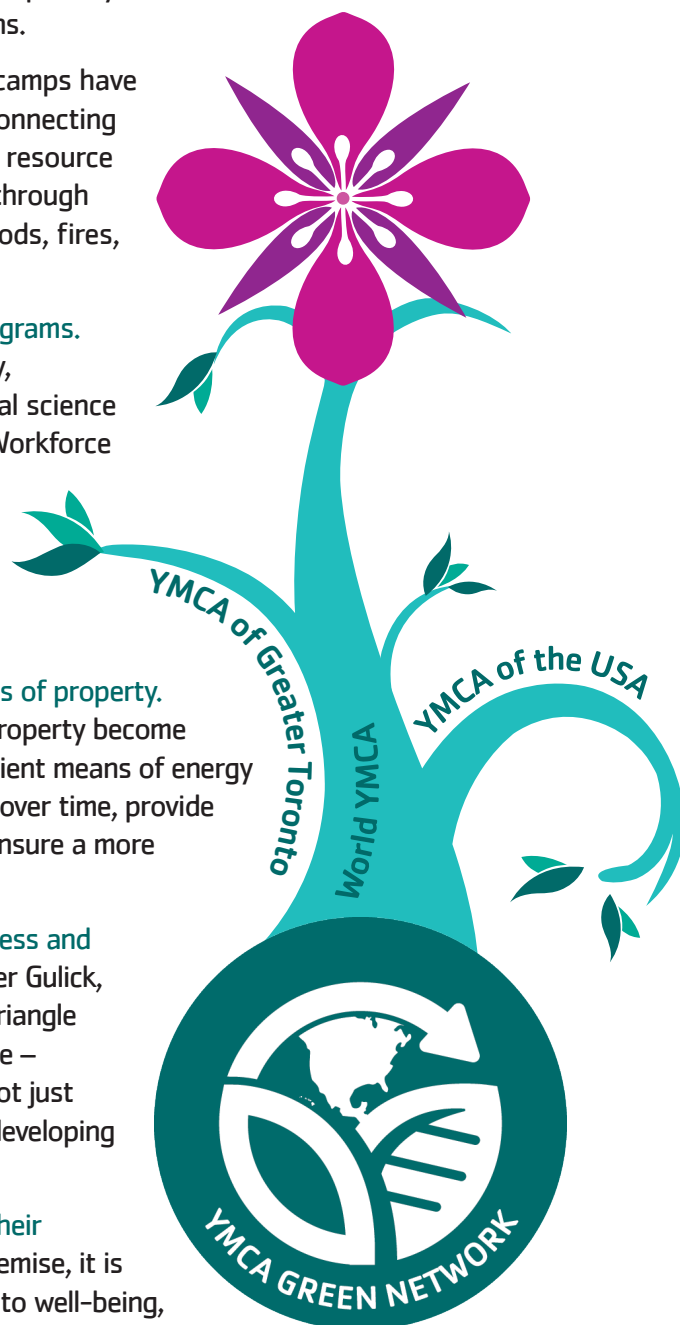
YMCAs in North America operate thousands of facilities and acres of property. Over time, the daily operations and upkeep of our facilities and property become increasingly more expensive to maintain. Upgrading to more efficient means of energy and building more resilient structures can save the YMCA money over time, provide safe and reliable spaces during environmental emergencies and ensure a more sustainable future for YMCA operations and facilities.

Historically, we have acted on a holistic approach to health, wellness and community strengthening from our beginnings. In 1891, Dr. Luther Gulick, proposed a triangle as the symbol of the YMCA. The equilateral triangle represents a holistic approach to personal development. Each side – spirit, mind and body – reflects the Y's dedication to nurturing, not just individual parts of our well-being, but a whole person approach developing well-balanced individuals and strong communities.

"We are not a spirit, mind and body, but the wonderful result of their union." (Luther H. Gulick, M.D. 1894). Building from Dr. Gulick's premise, it is not a stretch to include the environment in our holistic approach to well-being, as health is greatly influenced by environmental factors – air quality, access to clean water, reliable and efficient energy, and weather events, to name a few – potentially expanding our purpose to developing healthy spirit, mind, body and planet for all.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

YMCA Green Ecosystem...	3
Quick Assessment.....	5
Prioritization Matrix.....	9
Examples & Resources...	10
Acknowledgments.....	17



THE FIREWEED PLANT IS A SYMBOL OF HOPE AND RESILIENCE

Fireweed's ability to thrive in habitats affected by natural disasters symbolizes the sustainability transformation we hope to see in the world.

Global and North American YMCA Green Initiatives

Every day, Y's in 120 countries help people to reach their full potential and create a better future for themselves

For more information, visit: ymca.org/world-service



The global YMCA movement spans 120 countries and 12,000 local associations.

The World YMCA vision is a world where every person lives in harmony with self, society and creation. Its mission is to empower young people and communities worldwide to build a just, sustainable, equitable and inclusive world where every person can thrive in body, mind and spirit.

A Sustainable Planet is the third of four Pillars of YMCA Vision 2030, which was adopted by YMCA delegations around the world, including the North American YMCAs of the USA, Canada and Mexico.

The World YMCA encourages us all to commit and take action for the protection and regeneration of our planet, preparing for a just transition to a world where humans live in full harmony with nature.

In North America, YMCAs are strengthening their communities through sustainability efforts

YMCA of the USA (Y-USA) supports local and global YMCAs to achieve environmental sustainability goals as part of the US YMCA movement's commitment to advance World YMCA Vision 2030. Y-USA provides networking and technical assistance to help local YMCAs and alliances access state and federal funding opportunities related to renewable energy and environmental sustainability.

The partnership with the National Park Service (NPS) has provided local YMCAs program funding and technical assistance to expand youth access to state and national parks, reaching over 100,000 youth since 2015.

Y-USA also facilitates the Youth-Led Solutions Initiative (YLSI), in partnership with the World YMCA, which empowers youth with seed funding, learning opportunities, and networking assistance to lead grassroots environmental action and community resilience initiatives at local and global YMCAs. Many of the efforts are co-led by youth across borders through Y-to-Y partnerships and coalitions.

Within the first three years, YMCAs throughout the U.S. and 32 countries have impacted 300,000 people and engaged 100 community partners (see graphic at right). The YLSI will continue to support impactful, youth-led efforts to address local environmental challenges over the next three years through World Service and a new global partnership with Lyft.

Collected by over 31 countries in the first 3 years:



26K+

TREES PLANTED



3T+

COLLECTED WASTE



25K

PLASTIC BOTTLES RECYCLED



23K

POUNDS OF FOOD RESCUED

YMCA Green Ecosystem

Define your path to Greener! The YMCA Green Ecosystem assessment and prioritization processes on the following pages will assist you in deciding where you want to begin and what's important to you. Through a brief, internal assessment of your current practices, you will be able to recognize what you're currently doing, assess areas to focus on, and then prioritize and determine your next steps.



Five areas of the YMCA Green Ecosystem:

1. **Commitment**

Vision, Strategy & Alignment

Define your YMCA's sustainability vision, goals and strategies. Utilize the Environmental Sustainability Toolkit and develop a Green Action Plan.

2. **Engagement**

Staff, Volunteers & Community Partners

Engage staff and volunteers at all levels and develop relationships and collaborations with community partners. Prioritize inviting young people as collaborators.

3. **Programs**

YMCA Programs, Community Education & Events

Identify opportunities to build eco-friendly components into **existing** programs and partner to create new programs that align with your YMCA and community partners' goals.

4. **Property**

Buildings, Sites & Transportation

Understand your YMCA's current infrastructure and emissions output and outline areas of opportunity to increase efficiency.

5. **Advancement**

Financial & Government Supports

Secure funding and advocate for government support to advance your sustainability initiatives.

JOIN YMCA GREEN SPACE

YMCA Green Space is made up of YMCA leaders across the globe who are committed to helping their YMCA go greener.

Our online sharing platform includes:

- An electronic version of this toolkit
- Examples and resources to support action items listed in the Quick Assessment on the next page
- Online collaboration groups you can join to learn more about a specific area, share your examples, and ask questions
- Information on educational webinars
- Access to awesome YMCA professionals who are passionate about a sustainable future



Sign Up for the
YMCA Green Space
www.YMCAGreenSpace.org



GETTING STARTED ON YOUR PATH TO A GREENER YMCA



Quick Assessment – YMCA Green Ecosystem

Use the assessment below to determine your current state and what items you might want to include in your YMCA Green Action Plan.

Note: Examples of most action items found in the Quick Assessment may be found on the YMCA Green Space site. More examples and resources will be added regularly, as YMCAs are encouraged to share information.

Most action items are self/organization driven (low cost), meaning the items can be completed primarily with time and energy from staff and volunteers.

Some items may require additional resources (higher cost) such as consultants.



Actions

Current State

- NS: Not Started
- MP: Minimal Progress
- SP: Sufficient Progress
- GP: Great Progress

Include in your Y's Green Action Plan

- Y – Yes, definitely include in Plan
- C – Consider including in Plan
- D – Delay, do not include in Plan at this time

COMMITMENT

A. CEO Commitment

- Gain commitment to making sustainability a priority

B. Point Person

- Appoint a person responsible for implementing your Green Action Plan. Recommend a current senior leader or dedicated role who is or becomes an active member of the YMCA Green Network

C. YMCA Green Goals

- Develop goals with staff and board leadership
- – See examples on Pages 11–13

D. YMCA Green Action Plan

- Include the detailed actions and impacts across your Association to meet your Green Goals

E. Board Inclusion & Alignment

- Identify committees to engage and establish a reporting cadence



Actions

COMMITMENT (Continued)

F. Strategic Plan

Include environmental sustainability initiatives and/or focus area(s) within your existing or renewed Strategic Plan

G. Green Practices, Procedures & Policies

Expand operational, facility and sourcing procedures to improve sustainability; develop a stand-alone guide or incorporate into standard operating procedures

H. Disclosures & Visibility

Disclose your green practices, procedures and policies in annual reports, on website and in facility and site signage

Current State

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Y - Yes, definitely include in Plan
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Actions

ENGAGEMENT

A. Green Team(s)

Form teams, including but not limited to staff, members, volunteers and/or youth leaders to lead implementation of your Green Action Plan

The leader of your Green Team is an active member of the YMCA Green Space

B. Community Stakeholder Analysis

Conduct a stakeholder analysis to identify potential collaborators

C. Partnership

Develop a partnership engagement plan to support your goals

D. Staff Education & Awareness

Develop training, experiences and communications to educate staff on your Green Action Plan and how they can get involved

E. Member Education & Awareness

Develop programs, experiences and communications to educate members on your Green Action Plan and how they can get involved

F. YMCA Youth & Young People

Develop or partner on programs, experiences and events that engage young people

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PROGRAMS

A. YMCA Programming

Include environmental stewardship and outdoor education components in Y programs

B. Overnight Camp

Enhance programs to include environmental stewardship / outdoor education (e.g. Leave No Trace accreditation)

C. Outdoor Initiatives

Participate in one or more **national and/or global outdoor initiatives and programs** (e.g. National Parks Service-YMCA partnership, Youth-Led Solutions through Y-USA & the World Y, Bold & Gold program, YMCA Earth Service Corps)

D STEM Programming

Enhance programs to include Green technology and science components

E. Creative Arts Programming

Add sustainability and eco-friendly topics and themes to arts programs

F. Green Jobs Awareness

Expand workforce development programming to include Green Jobs

G. Community Education

Provide disaster preparedness information and programming

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Include in your Y's Green Action Plan

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Actions

PROPERTY

A. Property and Energy Audits

Perform detailed condition assessments of your major equipment and assets to understand remaining life, replacement costs, and to identify energy saving alternatives and new technology options, then build your list of actions

B. Energy Efficiency Actions

Build a list of electricity-saving activities (e.g. LED lighting, motion sensors for lighting, variable speed drives, efficient pumps/motors, **eco-friendly fitness equipment** etc.)



Actions

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PROPERTY (Continued)

C. Efficient Transportation Actions

- Review green Fleet alternatives, develop Active Transportation supports (cycling, e-bikes) and EV charging

D. Waste Audit

- Conduct audit and implement waste reduction and diversion actions

E. Water Audit

- Develop plan to reduce water consumption as well as manage and protect natural water systems

F. Resilience Hub Audit

- Develop plan to support local communities in major weather events and acute shocks

G. Biodiversity Audit

- Develop plan to manage and protect local ecology, support local food systems, and expand spaces for native biodiversity

H. New Development Planning

- Renew or develop facility and property guidelines to include green practices for new locations or major expansions



Actions

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ADVANCEMENT

A. Foundations & Government Supports

- Review list of foundations & government programs that support sustainability initiatives and develop a plan to seek funding in each area

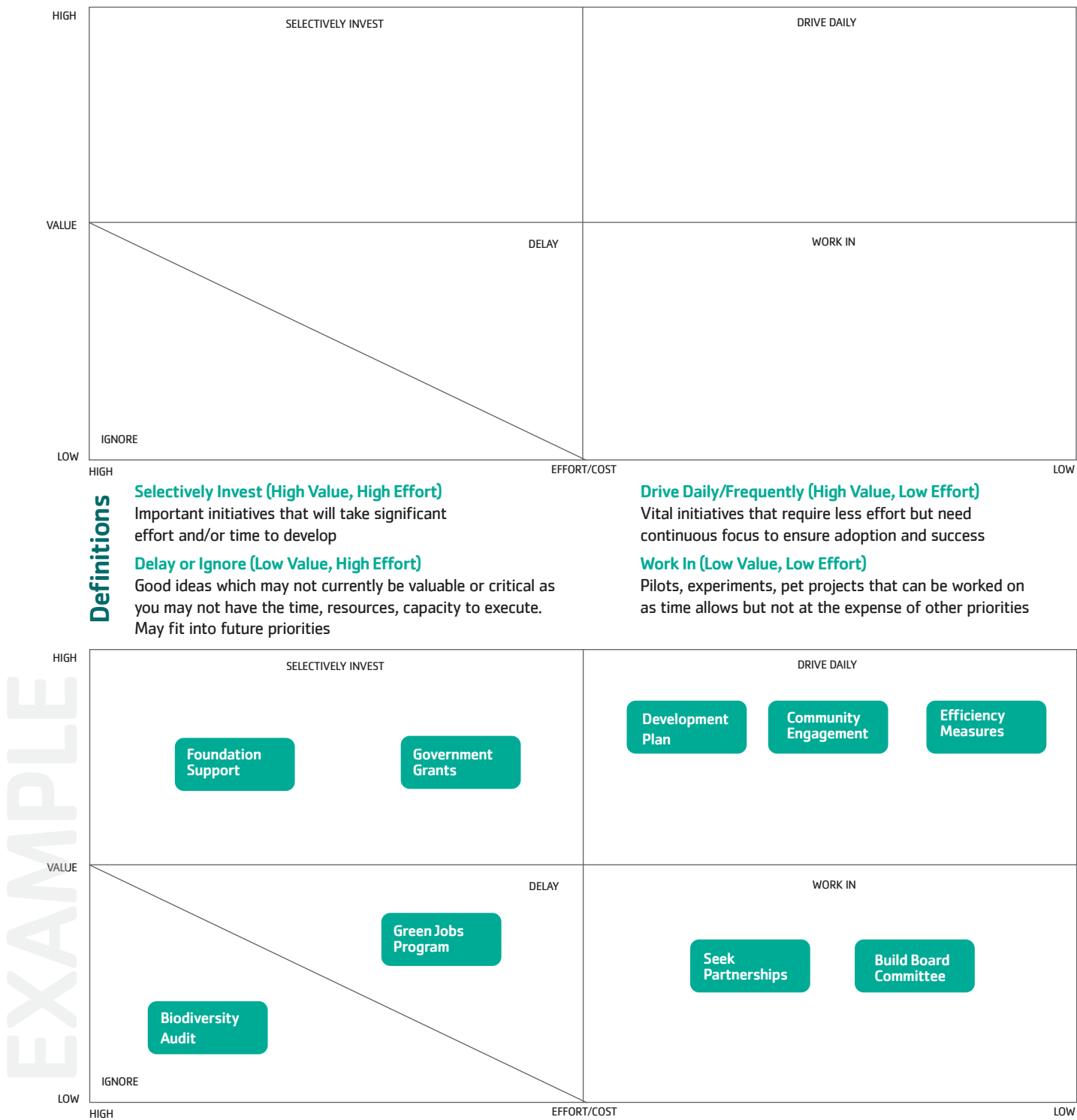
B. Advocacy

- Develop advocacy plan focused on your sustainability initiatives
- Add sustainability initiatives and support needed to materials at local and state/province levels

PRIORITIZATION MATRIX

YMCA Green Action Plan

Utilizing the Quick Assessment, identify areas that you want to focus on for your YMCA Green Action Plan and plot those initiatives in the Prioritization Matrix (adapted and used with permission from Stagen, LLC, <https://stagen.com/>).



BUILD YOUR GREEN ACTION PLAN

Build your YMCA's Green Action Plan by utilizing one or more of the 5 areas of the YMCA Green Ecosystem to organize your action items based on your readiness and resources. To ensure commitment to each area of your green ecosystem, your YMCA can build goals and strategies into your strategic plan.

Commitment

Vision, Strategy & Alignment
Define your YMCA's sustainability vision, goals and strategies. Use the Environmental Sustainability Toolkit and develop a Green Action Plan

Advancement

Financial & Government Supports
Secure funding and advocate for private or government support to advance your sustainability initiatives

Engagement

Staff, Volunteers & Community Partners
Engage staff and volunteers at all levels and develop relationships and collaborations with community partners. Prioritize inviting young people as collaborators

Property

Buildings, Sites & Transportation
Understand your YMCA's current infrastructure and emissions output and outline areas of opportunity to increase efficiency

YMCA Programs

Community Education & Events
Identify opportunities to build eco-friendly components into **existing** programs and partner to create new programs that align with your YMCA and community partners' goals

Here is an example set of YMCA Green Goals, with more detailed measures shared on the following pages. The YMCA Green Space site will provide additional examples, links and documents, and we hope you will share your experiences and successes as you continue on your journey.

- » **Reduce Carbon Emissions**
- » **Improve the Natural Environment**
- » **Reduce Water Consumption**
- » **Partner with the Community**



1: Reduce Carbon Emissions

- » Use less energy and save money while doing it
- » Focus on Scope 1 & 2 Emissions first, then extend deeper into Scope 3 Emissions if possible

Reducing the energy used in our buildings to heat and cool them, power the equipment, heat the water, and power the computers and lighting is the largest contributor to carbon footprint reduction. In addition, other forms of gases pollute our neighborhoods and waterways, such as emissions from travel and waste decomposition.

EXAMPLE GOALS FOR YOUR YMCA:

- Reduce our overall greenhouse gas emissions below baseline year by a determined percentage by 2050
- Reduce overall energy use below baseline year by a determined percentage by 2050
- Use high-efficiency fixtures, appliances and equipment in all renovations and future development
- Fund and implement energy-saving techniques and processes
- Promote the use of alternatives to travel, including public transportation, rideshares and teleconferencing
- Use renewable energy systems (e.g. PV, geothermal)
- Work with vendors to develop sustainable purchasing guidelines

EXAMPLE

Work together to develop energy-saving techniques and sustainable practices





2: Improve the Natural Environment

» Identify places for greenspace improvements

» Manage rural spaces with non-invasive biodiverse species

Reclaim and enhance natural spaces across the buildings and properties we own, lease, operate and visit in a way that promotes biodiversity and improved health of users:

- Restore XX acres/hectares of natural biodiverse land
- Increase resilience and natural disaster preparedness through sustainable land stewardship practices and local partnerships
- Protect, restore and enhance local biodiversity by understanding and working with native species to improve the health of local environments

Minimizing the amount of waste sent to landfills is a top priority. Below are methods to reduce waste destined for the landfill.

- Divert waste by recycling, composting, and reducing single-use plastic
- Find out what recycling options are available in your municipality



REDUCE

REDUCE. REUSE. RECYCLE. These are the three preferred methods of waste minimization; however, when solid waste cannot be eliminated, make a commitment to careful management and disposal.



REUSE

- Divert waste by recycling, composting and reducing single-use plastic
- Find out what recycling options are available in your municipality
- Reduce the amount of waste sent to landfill below baseline year by a determined percentage by 2050



RECYCLE

- Reduce single plastic use by providing reusable water containers or, if necessary, using recyclable containers (cans, paper, glass) instead of plastic water bottles for meetings and events
- Recycle paper, cardboard, glass, plastic and metal
- Dispose of electronic equipment and devices in an environmentally responsible manner, including computers, ink cartridges, cell phones and batteries
- Promote the reuse of furniture and other fixtures
- Properly recycle and/or dispose of hazardous materials



EXAMPLE

3: Reduce Water Consumption

- » Operational changes to save water with some financial gain
- » Education and promotion to users around water wastage

Our YMCAs affect water in many different ways through our indoor programming as well as our outdoor spaces in urban and rural locations. We can have impact on what we take and put back into our water systems as well as how we manage and protect them.

- Reduce water consumption year over year
- Encourage the use of reusable water containers and water coolers or tap water in our premises and add signage describing our commitment to reuse
- Improve our maintenance procedures to put less chemicals down the drains into our water systems
- Reduce exterior water use and irrigation through improved plantings, rain capture and scheduling



EXAMPLE

4: Partner with the Community

- » An environmentally responsible organization does not come simply from a reduction of its environmental footprint

Connecting into our community is a cornerstone of our mission and provides endless opportunities to engage and expand our environmental impact.

- Use food that is local and healthy
- Offer volunteerism opportunities through green teams
- Offer education such as classes, signage and expanded programming for both guests and staff
- Support communities in climate emergencies and resilience opportunities
- Incorporate volunteerism into sustainability initiatives
- Build educational elements into activities and programs, including passive education such as signage
- Discover organizations in your community who are engaged in sustainability efforts
- Partner to build programs and collaborations



Partner to build programs and collaborations in your community





**JOIN THE
NETWORK**

Visit www.YMCAGreenSpace.org



WE ARE PASSIONATE PEOPLE WHO SHARE A VISION

Empowering and supporting
YMCAs who are committed
to a sustainable future



YMCA Green Network – North America

Healthy Spirit, Mind, Body and Planet for All

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The YMCA Green Network – North America is made up of dedicated Y staff and partners who are committed to a sustainable future. Over the course of 18 months, this group met monthly to share resources and develop a plan to empower and support Ys in their efforts to build green practices. This Toolkit and the network sharing platform is a result of their work.

As of 2025, the YMCA Green Network – North America online platform is made up of YMCAs across the U.S. and Canada along with team members from Y-USA, World YMCA and partners such as Gro Development and Technogym.

I want to personally thank each YMCA Green Network member for your willingness to join a group with a very grassroots beginning, and also for your persistence to work through an array of possibilities as we landed on a simple framework toward a more sustainable future. Your continued support to share examples and develop resources for your colleagues is very much appreciated. A special thanks to Alex Versluis, Amy Wolf, Eleanor Blair and Monet Love for authoring the toolkit and leading efforts to develop our sharing and networking site along with our partners Rallyhood, Gro and Technogym.

Thank you all for your incredible leadership!

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