

The Value of Environmental Education

The most obvious argument in support of incorporating environmental themes into today's educational curricula can be made by simply highlighting the current state of the planet and the rapid decline in the world's supply of natural resources.

As evidenced by global trends, human activities are undoubtedly threatening the planet's ability to meet the needs of present generations without compromising the needs of future generations. Pollution of air and water, accumulation of wastes, destruction of forests, erosion of soils, depletion of fisheries and damage to the ozone layer threaten the survival of humans and thousands of other living species.

Indeed these global trends prompted a United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. This Rio Earth Summit produced a declaration of action, called Agenda 21, as well as other treaties and conventions to move our global society onto a more sustainable path.

Chapter 36 of Agenda 21 addressed the issue of public awareness and training and focused on the role of education in environmental decision-making. It stated that:

“education is critical for promoting sustainable development and improving the capacity of people to address environment and development issues. ... It is also critical for achieving environmental and ethical awareness, values and attitudes, skills and behaviour consistent with sustainable development and for effective public participation in decision-making” (UNEP, 1992).

This declaration of action, together with other international directives, paved the way for concentrated efforts in the area of environmental education and challenged educators to incorporate issues of sustainable development into their teachings.

In addition to the important and urgent task of imparting knowledge to communities about environmental issues, environmental education has another significant role to play in broader education. In itself, environmental education is a valuable tool that teachers and educators can use to deliver meaningful curriculum to their students.

Research in Australia has indicated that students need to know what practical steps they can take to tackle environmental problems and issues. Hence educators need to focus on actions that others have undertaken and actions that students can undertake within their own school, homes and local community (Yenken et al., 2000).

Further research from the United States has shown that students who engage in their curriculum through environmental issues are making academic gains and developing higher-level thinking skills. The same study goes on to say that students who engage in environmental issues are able to deal with complex problems and issues, are more resourceful, more strategic thinkers, and more willing to deal with problems. (Sherman, 1998)

Combine this with the fact that most students genuinely enjoy connecting with the natural world, and educators should understand that environmental education is not

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only beneficial to their students but also an invaluable means of making their own task more interesting, stimulating and fun.

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