

A new beginning for environmental education in Australia

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In 1980-81 when I last wrote about the future of environmental education in Australian schools I was quite pessimistic and concluded that environmental education had been a phenomenon of the affluent seventies in Australia. This conclusion was based on observations, reading and experience with schools, education authorities and curriculum projects over the preceding seven years.

Environmental education aims to develop not only awareness, understanding and skills. Most importantly, it also aims to encourage feelings of concern for the environment and protection. This means that it is concerned with social reconstruction — environmental education programs must have moral and political components if they are to achieve the accepted aims of environmental education. In 1980-81 I argued that environmental education had been subjected to incorporation within the existing hegemony of schools in a neutralised form — the radical 'action' components of the environmental education aims had been deleted from school programs whilst the less controversial cognitive and skill aims had been retained, together with the name 'environmental education'. There was evidence that programs of this genre had increased during the seventies, including an increased environmental content in traditional subjects in the curriculum. In general terms there was little inducement for schools to implement all the aims of environmental education.

Relevant developments 1981-84

Since I published these conclusions there have been a number of developments which have made the outlook much more optimistic. Although the World Conservation Strategy was launched by the Prime Minister in March 1980 there was no immediate noticeable action on it at the national level. However by late 1981 a National Conservation Strategy Task Force had been established within the federal environment ministry and the process of developing a conservation strategy for Australia had commenced. These actions culminated in a national conference in June 1983 which proposed the National Conservation Strategy for Australia (NCSA) document which is currently being considered by Commonwealth, State and Territory governments. The NCSA has recently been endorsed by the Federal, South Australian, Victorian and Northern Territory governments.

Department of Arts, Heritage and Environment Canberra

It is this NCSA document which gives us a new direction, focus and hope for the future of environmental education in Australia. The document acknowledges the need for environmental education in improving the capacity of the community, professionals, technicians and users to manage the environment and in achieving the objectives of the NCSA. In 1980 the crucial role of the World Conservation Strategy, and consequently the NCSA, in providing a new stimulus for environmental education in Australia was not clear. But it is now apparent that the NCSA is a most important document for us. More on this later.

Also at the federal level, the Department of Home Affairs and Environment (now Arts, Heritage and Environment) established an environmental education section (with four staff) early in 1983. This section has as its function the promotion of environmental education in both formal and non-formal education sectors, and in principle therefore should be intimately involved in NCSA promotion and related education activities for specific target audiences, including schools, and the general community.

Another advance is that the Australian Labor Party's 1984 Platform includes a policy on environmental education. This policy is "to facilitate public participation and awareness of the need to preserve the environment for sustainable development by

- a) funding and expanding environment (sic) education and information programs
- b) further develop the environment (sic) education function in the Curriculum Development Centre
- c) upgrading financial and legal assistance to environment centres, other voluntary environment groups and trade unions engaged in environmental programs and issues."

Such recognition of the role of environmental education in achieving conservation for sustainable development is a key point in the continued development of environmental education at the national level. The importance of environmental education has already been recognised by the federal Labor government through their funding of education programs within the Department of Arts, Heritage and Environment and the re-establishment of the Curriculum Development Centre. Further support for environmental education is implicit in the ALP policy and it will be interesting to see the direction this takes.

The national Curriculum Development Centre was abolished by a committee of the previous federal government in 1981. (The committee was informally known as the "Razor Gang"). The Centre has now been reconstituted as part of the Commonwealth Schools Commission. During the seventies the Centre had an important role in promoting and co-ordinating environmental education activities for schools from the national level. By 1980 the Centre's environmental education program had been wound down and was only in a maintenance phase as one of the nine essential areas of knowledge and experience in the core curriculum. The implications of the core curriculum statement for environmental education had not been clarified at the time of the abolition of the Centre and the position of environmental education within the "new" Centre's functions has not yet been resolved. However, as noted previously, the Australian Labor Party platform states that the environmental education function of the Curriculum Development Centre will be further developed, so this augurs well for the future.

The Labor government has increased the grants to voluntary conservation organisations in accordance with the ALP Platform and much of this additional money is going towards educational activities.

At the non-government level, the Australian Association for Environmental Education has grown in strength and influence. The Association is now represented on the Australian Environment Council's (AEC) Environmental Education and Information Sub-Committee. (It should be noted that this is quite an achievement as such sub-committees generally only have government agencies requested on them. This sub-committee is unusual in that it also has representative from CONCOM and the Australian Conservation Foundation). The Association is also represented on the Interim Consultative Committee for the National Conservation Strategy for Australia as the sole education voice. The Association's representatives at the June 1983 NCSA conference (which agreed to the now published NCSA document) were responsible for instigating important changes to the references to environmental education in the strategy document.

The draft NCSA document which was discussed by the conference only saw a need 'to develop education programs to develop awareness throughout the community ...' As we all know, promoting awareness is only the first step in achieving an environmentally educated public. In recognition of the need for an 'action' component to environmental education programs the Association representatives managed to get the Conference to agree that education programs should also encourage the practice of living resource conservation for sustainable development. This expansion is a vital addition when considering the future directions of environmental education in Australia.

Indeed this acceptance of the role of education in encouraging environmental action is quite a step forward. In the past environmental education had mainly been envisaged and implemented in terms of developing awareness and understanding so this formal recognition and recommendation for environmental education to encourage action is most important.

As well as these national developments there have been significant advances for environmental education in several States. In South Australia in 1980 the Education Department published its statement on "Our Schools and Their Purposes: Into the 80's" This

statement included environmental education as one of the eight major areas of the curriculum in schools. Such a Departmental statement on the essential nature of environmental education learning experiences in any school curriculum meant that schools and teachers who have not previously given consideration to environmental education in their programs may now be obliged to do so. This action by the Education Department is certainly a positive step towards the implementation of environmental education in South Australian schools. As noted previously, another positive action from South Australia was the recent endorsement of the NCSA by the State Government. Such endorsement also implies further support for the development of environmental education programs.

Other encouraging recent State-level developments for environmental education include the formation of the Victorian Education Department's environmental education curriculum committee, the establishment of an environmental education advisory committee in New South Wales, and the release of the Victorian Government's discussion paper on a State Conservation Strategy which stresses the importance of environmental education in its implementation. The Victorian Government, and the Northern Territory Government, have also endorsed the NCSA.

The future

The National Conservation Strategy for Australia provides a focus and framework for developing environmental education programs for schools and other audiences.

The four objectives of living resource conservation adopted for the NCSA include three identified in the World Conservation Strategy. The objectives are:

- to maintain essential ecological processes and life-support systems;
- to preserve genetic diversity;
- to ensure the sustainable utilisation of species and ecosystems;
- to maintain and enhance environmental qualities.

These objectives give basic guidelines for developing future environmental education programs.

Within the NCSA, education and training is seen as one of the priority national actions. Specifically the actions are to:

- Develop and support informal education and information programs, including those conducted by voluntary and other non-government organisations, which promote throughout the community an awareness of the interrelationships between the elements of the life-support systems and which encourage the sustainable development.
- Review, strengthen and developing schools environmental education programs which have regard for the basic objectives and principles of the NCSA.
- Review, strengthen and develop training, retraining and extension programs for professionals, technicians and users involved in planning and management of activities which impinge upon living resources, which have regard for the basic objectives and principles of the NCSA.

The endorsement of the NCSA by the federal government and the support for the NCSA in ALP policy also give hope for the future. The federal government is now examining ways of implementing the strategy, such as through the national soil conservation program and national tree program, and

education is accepted as a most important implementation strategy. As noted earlier, environmental education is recognised in the ALP Policy as a means of facilitating public participation and awareness of conservation for sustainable development. Developing appropriate programs to achieve the NCSA objectives is a task for the present and future.

Conclusion

The NCSA is a most significant document for Australia as its endorsement, or even acceptance in principle, by the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments will indicate a turning point in the prevailing attitudes to the Australian environment. To paraphrase John Fitzgerald Kennedy (1961), adopting the principles and objectives of the NCSA will mean that we will no longer be asking what our environment can do for us, instead we will be asking what we can do for our environment.

However, if Australia is to succeed in achieving living resource conservation for sustainable development there is a crucial role for education and training in developing public awareness and encouraging individual and group participation in appropriate practices. This is a large task and there is a danger that the enormity of it could prove too much. As the politician Machiavelli (1513) once said:

“There is nothing more difficult to arrange, more doubtful of success, and more dangerous to carry through than initiating changes”

Although it may sometimes seem easier to give in than to fight we must take up the challenge and do our best to improve existing conditions.

Environmental education programs which aim to achieve the objectives of the NCSA will need to be interesting, stimulating, colourful and appealing. They will not only be designed to develop awareness, understanding and feelings of concern, they will also need to motivate people to act constructively for the environment. This will mean a change from the fact-orientation of many current environmental education programs to an action-orientation. Facts are still an important component of the process of educating people for action, but they are not sufficient in themselves. As a recent exploratory survey of public attitudes to nature conservation by McNair Anderson concluded:

‘Our data seems to show that, given present levels of knowledge, and present attitudes, Australians only think about Nature Conservation when a specific issue arises. Once that issue fades away, so does awareness and interest.
... if a campaign stimulates interest, excitement and involvement, there is a real danger of frustration if they are not told what they can do about it’.

Action is an integral part of the success of environmental education.

At the moment environmental education does not have the high profile it needs. Many people still only associate the environment with issues such as the Franklin dam or Cape Tribulation road. They don't know about “living resource conservation for sustainable development” We need to get this message or philosophy for living across to as many people as we can through formal and non-formal education programs. To do this, government and non-government organisations will need to become more political — seeking funding and publicity, representation on

appropriate committees and, most importantly, being visible as environmental educators.

All interested Australians must work together to get the NCSA message across and to get it implemented around Australia.

The National Conservation Strategy for Australia is a document we can all analyse and act upon. It is most unusual in that it was arrived at by consensus by government, industry, conservation and other interest groups just over a year ago. It has a lot going for it and it has a lot going for us because it gives us a focus for developing our future programs and for seeking more attention and funding for environmental education.

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