

Feature Article

THE POWERS THAT BE : Political Education Through an Environmental Study

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In its broadest sense the "environment" component of environmental education spans such diverse areas as dietary habits, in vitro fertilisation, religious beliefs, occupational health, desertification, the changing nature of work, arms control and over-population. At its best contemporary environmental scholarship highlights the degree to which all these issues are intimately related.

At its worst and narrowest, the process of environmental educational consists of firstly identifying the basic features of an ecosetting for example, a rainforest, a reef or an urban waterway; and studying environmental change in that setting through identifying the goodies and baddies in relation to impacts upon that environment.

An experience I had recently teaching about North Stradbroke Island highlighted the dominance that the narrow view of environmental education has attained. In discussion prior to the study, students indicated that for them, the term "environment" was basically an alternative label for flora and fauna or the "green"/natural elements of the island. They could not comment very easily then about the place of humans in this picture of environment nor could they outline in any detail the range of social, economic or political factors affecting that island's environment. Such factors were incidental to that environment. Also students' ideas about "environmental conflict" and the island seemed to be centred on examples of actions taken by one or other of the

conflicting groups, through protest meetings or demonstrations, classifying the main contenders into two camps - those for and those against the bridge.

So it would seem that there are some misconceptions about what constitutes the approaches and methods of environmental education. With the thrust increasingly towards "political literacy" through environmental education, to address the problem of educating for the environment, these misconceptions act to dilute or detract from the message that environment is a social, political, economic and ecological concept. A second aspect of the message is that environmental conflict is a complex interplay of values, power, policy and decisions at the levels of individuals through to the bureaucracy or the corporation.

In this paper a case study of the proposed bridge link to North Stradbroke Island is used to illustrate ways of achieving a measure of political literacy. It addresses the two topics wherein misconceptions occur, namely of what "environments" are, and the nature of environmental conflict.

1. **Environments are not what they appear to be**

Environmental studies, located as they predominantly are in science and geography syllabuses, usually stress the visible, tangible features and processes of a particular environment. Topics usually covered include those about the flora, fauna, and the more obvious aspects of

human impacts and social conflicts in relation to specific environments.

Yet these environments are not just a combination of biological, geological, and other "observable" features. There are many forces at work shaping any ecosystem and this may be best illustrated by reference to one example, that of a person buying a house-and-land package.

The person looking at the property sees a house and land. Yet during the conveyancing procedures required for the purchase of the property it becomes increasingly apparent that many people and/or institutions have different ways of viewing that property - as a "good buy", as a fire risk, as a mortgage arrangement, as a change to a title deed, as a loss of old neighbours, as a cause of increased runoff on a slope, as an expression of market value in that area, to name just a few of the different perceptions. In other words the property itself forms part of a complex network of administrative, legal, sociological, economic, technological and political arrangements. It is part of a complex urban system in an equally

complex biophysical system, to put it technically. Figure 1 illustrates this difference between what may be called appearance and reality of a house and land package.

A tract of wetland or eucalypt forest can be approached in the same way. A forest has several dimensions, some of them to do with the trees and other wildlife there, some to do with peoples' behaviour and its effects upon that setting. These aspects of the forest can be considered the "observable" elements of the forest under study. However, there are other factors about the forest which have a direct bearing on the nature and continued existence of the area and yet are not so apparent to an observer. They are the valuing, monitoring, policy and decision-making dimensions, and consideration of these has been a curriculum concern in environmental education for the past five years or so, particularly with the press for increasing political literacy through environmental education.

Figure 1:
House and Land Package - the visible and invisible dimensions

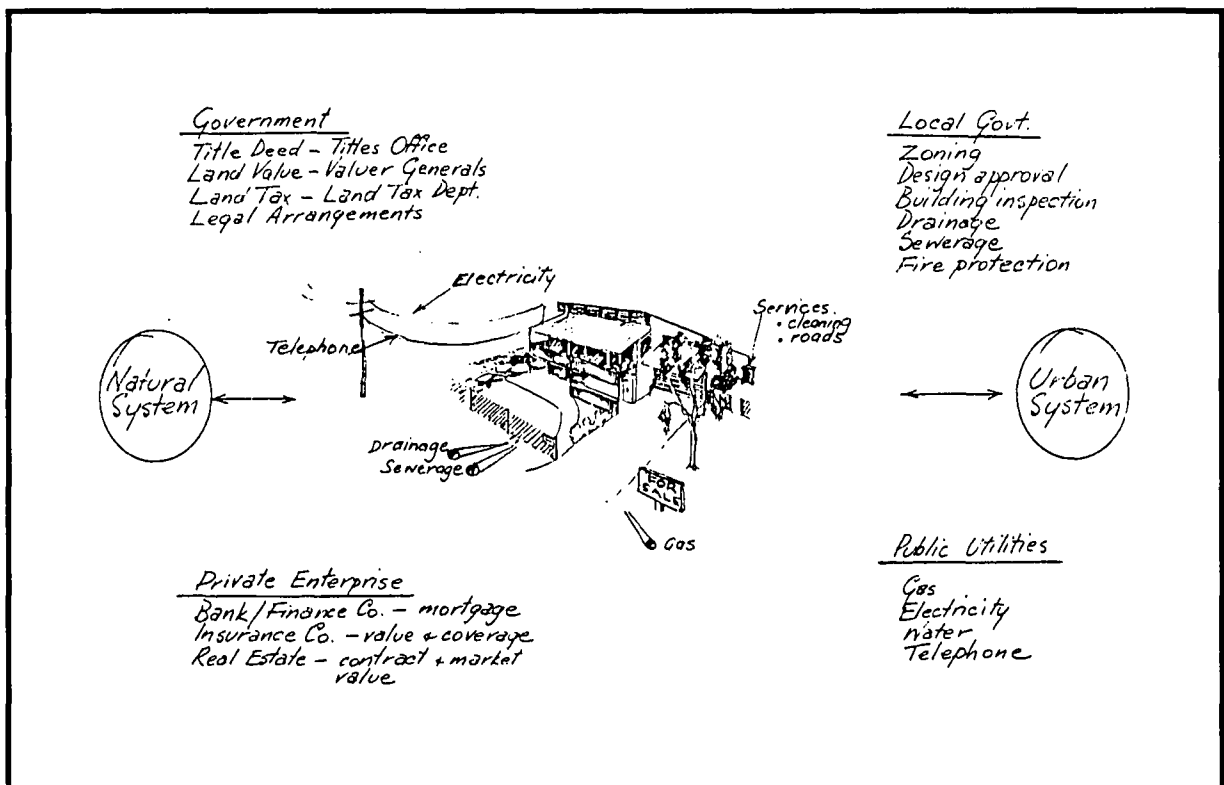


Figure 2:
The Forest - Visible and Invisible Controls


STRUCTURES AND INFORMATION SOURCES				PROCESSES	
The Forest - the biophysical controls	Climate Geology Topography Flora Fauna 			Human Uses and Impacts . Geographical and Ecological Processes	
Documentation	title deeds air photographs landsat surveys	resource inventories species collections monitoring data roads, topography maps historical data		. monitoring . recording . interpreting . presenting	
Interest Groups and User Groups	<u>Bureaucracy</u> water supply forestry soil conservation lands department national parks department main roads	<u>Private Enterprise</u> forestry mining real estate farming	<u>Community</u> public access rehabilitation preservation recreation jobs	. conflicts . alliances . development proposals . policy-making . ad hoc decisions . environmental impact statements . implementation	
Values	Real Estate Wilderness Future generations Tourism Health "Alternative Lifestyles"	Heritage Forest Products Science Multiple Use Recreation Rates		. Perception . Alliances . Conflicts	
Legal, Political and Administrative Framework	Local Ward Bureaucracy	State Electorate Bureaucracy and Statutory Authorities	National Statistical Divisions National Estate Royal Commissions Bureaucracy	International World Heritage United Nations Environment Program Global Monitoring Systems	. representation . lobbying . policy making . town planning . conflicts of interests . alliances

Figure 3:
"Environmental" Study of the Bridge Link to North Stradbroke Island

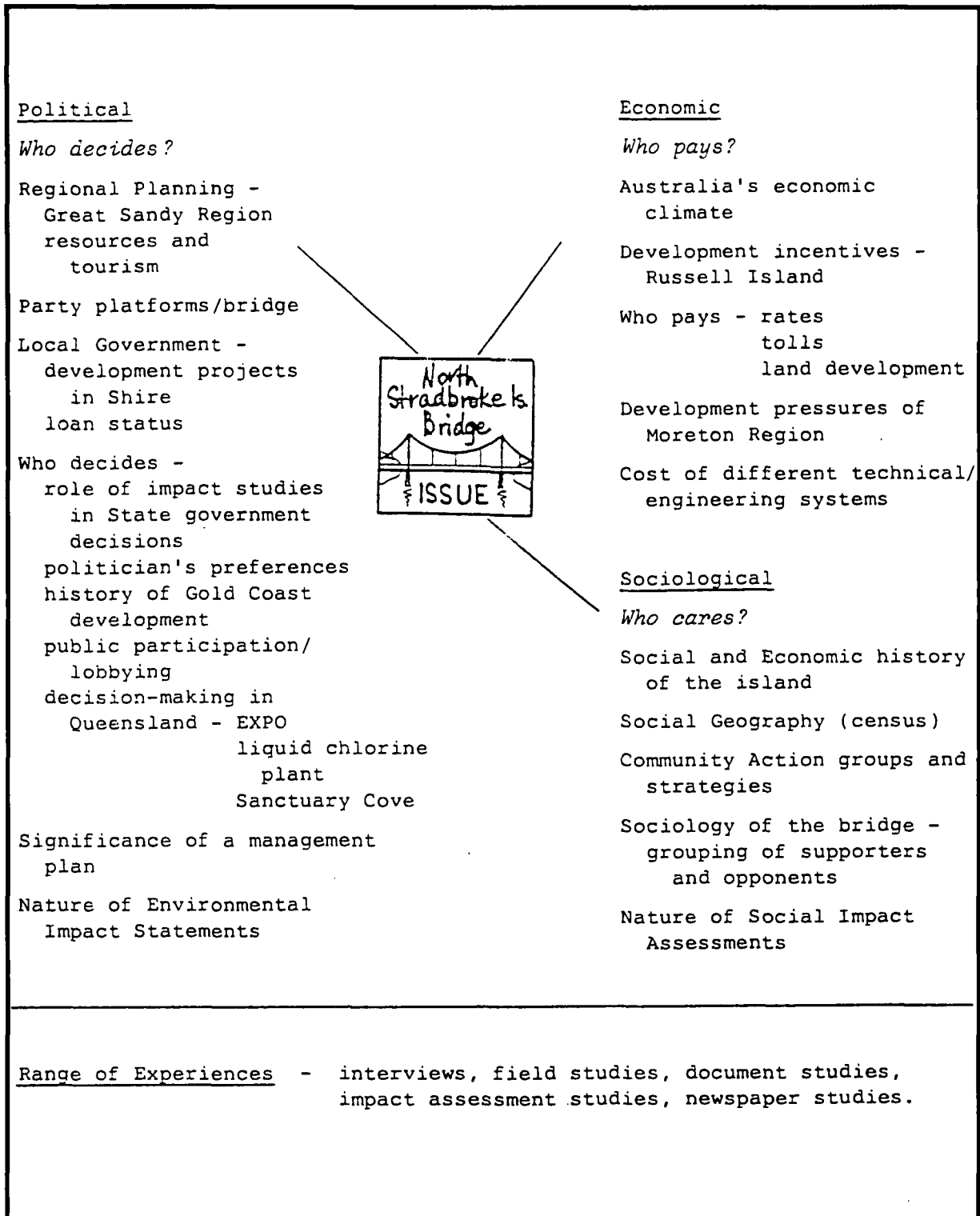


Figure 4:
Ideological Positions and Pollution Topic

Pollution and politics

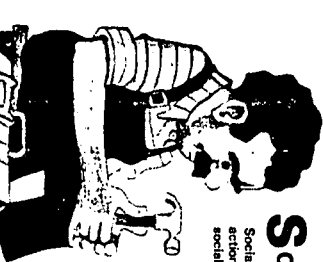
How do conventional politicians shape up on environment and pollution issues? And where should environmentalists be placed in the political spectrum? Here's your thumb-nail guide to who believes in what when it comes to ecology.

CONSERVATIVE

Mainstream Christian Democrat conservatives see the market place as the main economic motor of society. Patriotic, emphasising one nation. In Europe (but not North America) supporting limited welfare for the needy, sceptical of government interference or regulation, concentrating on freedom of individual and maintenance of the family.

Many conservatives see themselves as the natural party of the environment, 'conserving what is best'. They have a traditional attachment to the land; they own a lot of it, and are conscious that they inherited it from their ancestors. A sense of stewardship can be found amongst many, especially those who want to hand the countryside on unblemished to their children. Conservative patriotism is often expressed in the physical state of the nation past and present: gardens, trees, hedgerows and wild flowers, comfortable old buildings, all woven together in a myth about national identity. A latent anti-industrialism remains; successful conservative industrialists still see their goal as a rural retreat, so strong is the connection between social success and landed gentry. A Conservative recently commented: 'The history of English green sensibility leads to four key values: property, community, history and beauty. They are values which Conservatives should feel at home with.'

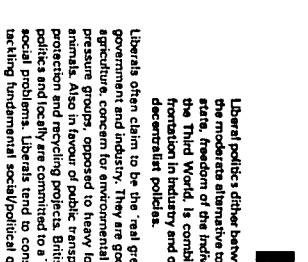
SOCIALIST



Socialists have traditionally seen state action as the way to ensure equal opportunities for all. Such action would reduce economic inequalities and redistribute wealth from rich to poor. Democratic socialists try to operate in the context of a mixed economy with both private and public sectors generating wealth and the state redistributing it through the welfare system.

Socialists have tended to be sceptical of green issues, characterising the anti-growth sentiments of environmentalists as the 'middle classes pulling up the ladder behind them'. Instead they remain committed to economic growth as the means of solving poverty and financing welfare programmes. Most socialists, when forced to think about the environment, add it as an afterthought to a shopping list of things to be done. But many now recognise that the penalties of pollution fall most heavily on the poorest. Socialist environmental policies are usually a diverse group of commitments quite separate from their economic premises. There are some signs this approach is changing as jobless growth becomes a reality. Socialists have begun to articulate sound environmental policies, for instance that energy conservation measures are a better bet than nuclear power for creating secure jobs. In practice socialists have a better record on environmental questions than their opponents, pioneering town and country planning policies, national parks, green belts, air and water pollution controls, and health and safety at work measures.

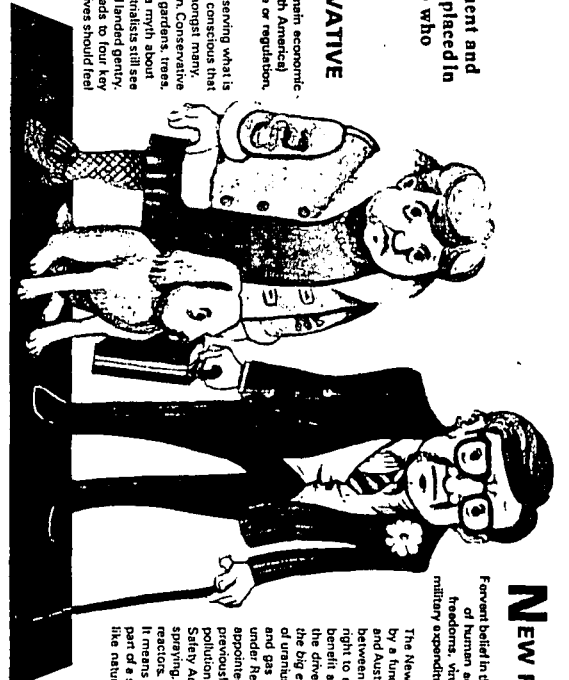
LIBERAL/SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC



Liberal politics differs between aspiring to be a radical alternative to socialism and the moderate alternative to the extremes of left and right. Support for the welfare state, freedom of the individual, concern for the underprivileged at home and in the Third World, is combined with a stress on partnership rather than confrontation in industry and other aspects of life. Anti-big business, pro small scale, decentralist policies.

Liberals often claim to be the 'real green party', pointing to their 'small is beautiful' approach to government and industry. They are good on ecological issues: the energy conservation, low-tech agriculture, concern for environmental protection in local neighbourhoods. Active in single issue pressure groups, opposed to heavy taxes, air/water pollution, nuclear power, exploitation of animals. Also in favour of public transport, safeguarding planning and greenbelt policies, wildlife protection and recycling projects. British liberals have approved no-growth sustainable economy politics and locally are committed to a 'less growth at any cost' approach to solving economic and social problems. Liberals tend to consider that issues can be resolved piecemeal rather than tackling fundamental social/political questions.

This guide was prepared for the New Internationalist by Martin Starr



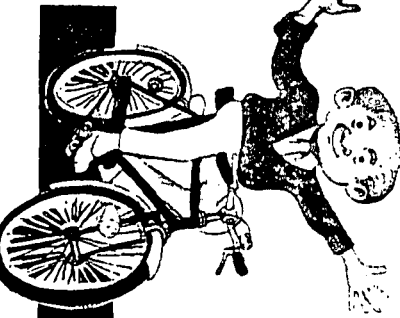
NEW RIGHT

Formerly believed in the market as the ultimate arbiter of all forms of human activity. Strong on rhetoric about individual freedoms, viridity, anti-community, supporting a large military expenditure, anti-welfare and the 'big brother' state.

The New Right view of the environment is influenced by a fundamentalist Christian perspective. In the US and Australia, which - like Marxism - sees a basic dual between people and nature, with people having the right to exploit the environment to the full for their benefit and profit. Limits to growth are dismissed in the drive to produce. Also pro-nuclear, supportive of the Big energy corporations encouraging exploitation of uranium deposits, strip mining, fast depletion of oil and gas deposits and forest resources. In the US and elsewhere, the New Right activists have been predominantly involved as farm environmentalists, many were appointed to key government posts. Many were appointed to key government posts, many were appointed to key government posts and for the resumption of DDT spraying, new freeways and the building of nuclear reactors. To such people, conservation is a dirty word. It means being hot in summer and cold in winter, it's part of a syndrome of not standing up to adversities - like nature.

THE GREENS

The Greens represent a political force which has grown out of single-issue environmentalism. They have a political programme which stresses the existing politics of left and right, elements not served by economic systems obsessed with industrial growth. They consider that an ecologically-based economy would bring an increase in the quality of life for those in the already affluent countries. They argue that wealth in the North is often created at the expense of the South, that each percentage point increase in Gross National Product quickens our consumption of finite and irreplaceable resources and that this is an injury to the rest of humanity and to the generations of the future. Think globally and act locally is the Green's slogan, stressing the international connections between the arms race and the famine in Africa, and the importance of self-determination locally.



SINGLE ISSUE ENVIRONMENTAL CAMPAIGNERS

The environment is seen by most as a classic 'single-issue' campaigner. Whether it be protest about motorways, nuclear power stations, river pollution, lead in petrol or campaigns to save particular canals, marshes, wetlands or sea walls, environmental campaigns are given such status as well-organised legitimised movements which have sometimes considerable public resonance in a big way. Environmentalists too originally saw themselves as single-issue campaigners, but some are now becoming 'Greens'.

COMMUNIST

Soviet-style governments are committed to state ownership and control of the means of production, distribution and exchange, believing that market forces lead to exploitation of the many by the few, and that the state should control economic and cultural activity for the benefit for the majority, that is the working class.

Centrally planned economies are committed to industrial development through rapid economic growth. Their interest in nature and the environment tends to be restricted to how they can control and exploit nature lest economic problems to a minimum. Having socialised the means of production socialist countries should have eradicated the essential contradictions which cause social tension. In theory, in centrally planned states ecological problems cannot develop because these societies have recognised the need for a harmonious relationship between people and nature. In practice this tends not to be the case (see *Democracy Your Country Love You* - Poland page 10). Internal critics argue that the selfish actions of the bureaucratic elite (15 per cent of top officials, intellectuals and administrators) are to blame; they are aware of an ecological crisis but don't tackle this because it would threaten their privileges and erode their extensive power.



THE HERITAGE LOBBY

The heritage supporter's concern is to conserve castles, great houses, remains of ancient forests, spectacular natural phenomena, endangered plant and animal species and their habitat. These are regarded as icons of national identity. Their object is to preserve unique examples of endangered culture against the ravages of progress. This ignores the connections between the workings of the economic system and its effects on the objects they cherish, and can lead to some controversial, if not contradictory, positions. Such a view point would be most eloquently expounded in *National Geographic* magazine.



Figure 2 explores the multiple dimensions of the forest from the viewpoint of the structures and processes governing it.

The method of identifying visible and invisible controls active in an environmental setting was used in a recent study of the proposed North Stradbroke bridge link. When the six-week study topic was introduced to my students in a Social Science course their first reaction was that it comprised an (quite simple) environmental study - it was just a matter of deciding if the bridge was a good or a bad idea. It seems that a bridge study which can be classified as environmental is one primarily concerned with deciding whether the bridge is going to irreversibly impact upon the island's natural environment or not. Then it is simply a matter of comparing the value of the bridge with that of the island's flora and fauna, leading to an identification of positions held by individual students in support of, or opposed to, such a bridge link. Simple!

However the presentations at the conclusion of the six-week study revealed that the study involved coverage of quite a different set of understandings - see Figure 3.

It has become apparent that an environmental study was not just a matter of assessing the impacts of the bridge on the island's flora and fauna along with airing student viewpoints about the acceptability or not of that outcome. Rather the concept of "environmental processes" took on a new perspective. Students themselves recognised that their reports focussed on important political, economic, sociological, ethical and technological aspects of the issue and that the "flora and fauna" component of the study was just one aspects out of the many which were accorded significance.

2. **Environmental conflict over a development proposal is not just a matter of identifying "who's for it and who's against it".**

Environmental studies also includes coverage of environmental issues. These topics are about social conflict and when teaching "issues" teachers are supposed to use all their skills for dealing with controversy both in society at large, and in the classroom. In order to make these issues more manageable as curriculum

and to deal with the multiple constraints of time, information and censorship (Maher, 1986), study methods have evolved which basically look at "both sides" of an issue, giving "equal time" for classroom coverage of each, ensuring "teacher neutrality" and perhaps including some "values clarification" exercises about differences in student viewpoints.

This approach to environmental controversy ignores a crucial dimension, namely the analysis of the role played by the political system. Understanding the political system is integral to studying any environmental conflict, people's support or not for different positions in that conflict, and teachers' and students' viewpoints about the same conflict. There is no way to avoid the fact that environmental education is centrally concerned with political education. As Huckle argues:

Within a radical programme of political education ... students would be encouraged to realize that people are creators of values and the social processes whereby they find expression. Values are reflected in different political ideologies, parties, and programmes, and a relevant ... education would allow students to evaluate competing conceptions of such values as social justice and environmental well-being and the political demands and policies which stem from them (Vogeler, 1977). It would also encourage a critical approach to the existing political system and acknowledge the role of power and conflict in preventing or enabling social change.

So how can environmental educators approach this challenge to educate for political understanding?

The centrepiece of the New Internationalist journal in March 1986 graphically portrayed the different positions people hold towards pollution and how these relate to particular political ideologies (see Figure 4). This case study is a valuable instrument for classroom discussion of aspects such as:

- the nature of political differences;
- how political ideologies affect people's stances on particular issues;

- the alliances and conflicts between groups;
- the role of stereotyping of positions observed in social conflicts;
- the question of the validity of classifying people in this way.

In summary, it is a tool suitable for discussion of social conflict using political/ideological positions as the focal point.

Using this model and a collection of newspaper articles, a study of the different viewpoints about the proposed North Stradbroke bridge link was devised. The study involved the following steps:

1. Students' reading of newspaper clippings about people's responses and arguments opposing or supporting the bridge link.
2. An exercise questioning the ideas that "if it's in print it must be true", and "if an expert says it, it must be right".
3. Identifying people and the positions they espouse (and the omission of any viewpoints); grouping of those with similar stances.
4. Categorising these positions according to the New Internationalist definition of political ideologies; reviewing the model in relation to our task. The outcome of this final task is represented in Figure 5.

The exercise promoted discussion of the nature of political ideologies and the difficulty of categorising people and organisations on the basis of either their "membership", or statements they are said to have made (by opponents or by the newspapers). It highlighted the fact that there are differences between various positions and yet alliances may be formed in spite of these differences because a certain goal is shared by the parties.

The last step in this study involved discussion of the strategies used by each group to gain support for their viewpoint and to influence vital decisions about the bridge's construction. An interesting finding in the student discussions was the recognition of differences in power wielded by the three main groups - the government, developers and greens. It

was noted that the government held powers over land tenure, advertising and choice of tenders, the raising of loans and grants, zoning and planning, approval or not to developers, and the provision of roads, utilities and other infrastructure. It was notable that little could be actually discerned about the operations of government department in relation to the decisions surrounding the bridge link.

This study in political beliefs and social conflict questions the use of the "both sides" technique of conflict studies. It goes political on the study of values and it allows discussion of the strategies, alliances and goals of social action. It does not require teachers to be neutral about the issue, but rather to be open about their own ideological position. It also ensures that the classroom is not seen as being ideology-free, but rather is viewed as a microcosm of society containing all the differences in political ideologies observable in the wider society.

In addition there is the practical consideration that computer access to newspaper articles is a primary resource for studies of this kind. Ready access to these is now possible, reducing the amount of preparatory work involved for teachers.

In summary there are many approaches available to achieve the various goals of environmental education. However the purpose served by perpetuation of simplistic approaches is not an acceptable one. Environmental literacy would seem to require literacy about the many systems determining the society, and what is then needed are teaching ideas to achieve this overview. Two examples have been explored in this article and may hopefully provide ideas for development of related teaching strategies.

References

- Huckle, J., "Values education through geography: A radical critique", Journal of Geography, March/April 1983.
- Maher, M., "Censorship, consensus and challenge - environmental education in schools in Australia", Social Alternatives, 5(2), April 1986.

Figure 5:
Classification of Bridge Link Viewpoints from Newspaper Clippings

