

Youth and the Environment

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Abstract

Youth have both special concerns and special responsibilities in relation to the environment. A number of environmental risks and hazards disproportionately affect young people, who have to live for an extended period with the deteriorating environment bequeathed to them by the earlier generations. Young people will be compelled to engage in new form of action and activism that will generate effective responses to ecological challenges.

Before investigating the role youth can play in addressing environmental issues, it is important to provide some background and establish a clear context by identifying the current state of environment. The nature, extent and severity of environmental problems vary tremendously from one part of the world to another. It is perhaps most logical to begin with an overview of the state of the global environment, providing a snapshot of its present condition, as well as a more detailed and revealing assessment of past trends and likely future developments. This level of analysis is justified because certain issues- most notably global warming and ozone layer depletion-are intrinsically global problems and therefore of concern to everyone in the world.

In this background, this paper begins with a brief overview of the condition of the world's environment and variations in environmental quality around the globe. It then addresses the adequacy of existing policy responses which provides a context for exploring the roles youth can play in environmental affairs. It also examines how these roles might be strengthened through such means as environmental education, whose importance and shortcomings are analyzed.

Finally this paper ends with the analyzing the role of media in contributing to- and sometimes impeding-social learning in environmental affairs.

Global indicators are additionally important because national and regional indicators can sometimes be misleading. For example, a country may show a downward trend in industrial pollutant level, but this may be because the more relaxed pollution standards. Global indicators fall into two categories, namely, measures of human well-being and assessments of the condition of the world's ecosystems on which all life depends. These two kinds of indicators give very different impressions about the nature-or even the existence – of a global ecological crisis. Measures of human well-being indicate that global trends over recent decades have almost all been positive. Life expectancy has risen, infant mortality has fallen, and the proportion of the world's population with access to clean drinking water has increased. The real price of most natural resources including oil, coal, gas and metals is declining with time. Bjorn Lomborg's book *The Skeptical Environmentalist* offers the best publicized recent positive interpretation of these trends. Part of the reason for improvements in the past few decades is the strenuous effort of environmentalists and other in pushing for pollution control, nature conservation and the like.

It has been argued that a focus on the global environment is important because it helps to control for displacement across place. However global aggregates obscure important local variations, which are substantial. Both environmental well-being and environmental stress are distributed unequally across the globe, meaning that issues of distributive justice intersect with environmental concerns. "Environmental Justice" is the focus of an emerging global debate. It is high-consumption societies that place significant pressure on the environment through, for example, per capita fossil fuel consumption many times that of poorer societies. The picture is a bit different with regard to stress imposed on the local ecosystem, because poorer societies often lack management capacity or the financial resources to invest in abatement technology. Still when it comes to transitions to sustainability, it is high-consumption societies that ought to lead the way, since they impose a higher degree of stress and have a greater capacity to relieve that stress.

The Role of Youth in Creating Environmental Awareness:

Young people constitute a large part of the world's population. Many, especially young children, are particularly vulnerable to environmental risks associated with, for example, access to clean and safe drinking water. In addition, young people will have to live longer with the consequences of current environmental decisions than will their elders. Future generations will also be affected by these decisions and the extent to which they have addressed concerns such as depletion of resources, the loss of biodiversity, and long-lived radioactive wastes. Representing the concerns of future generations is difficult in the context of policy-making in the present. However, the objective is not to expand the time horizons many years into the future; moving beyond the current very short-term focus of much decision-making would be sufficient.

Because youth have a stronger awareness of the issues and a greater stake in long-term sustainability, the environment is one area in which they ought to take the lead. In many countries, a generation that came of age politically in the 1970's organized and established environmental movements and green parties. To combat "the greying of the greens", a new generation needs to come to the fore. They will face challenges as pressures are brought to bear in the opposite direction. The commercialization of every area of life affects young people too. In addition, technologies that increasingly distances people from the environmental effects of their consumption decisions are growing with globalization, acting as an impediment to environmental awareness.

Strengthening Participation of Youth in Environmental Protection:

The participation of youth in environmental protection can be sought and locations ranging from grass-roots activism and participation in conservation projects to policy-making bodies and NGOs. The role of youth can be institutionalized in policy-making through advisory bodies such as youth councils. Many national governments have ministries or departments with "Youth Affairs" as part of their portfolio, though such offices tend to view youth as a population to be addressed by public policy, rather than a resource to be tapped for participation in policy-making in a variety of areas, including the environment. Currently, the participation of youth appears to be formalized more extensively in international governmental organizations than at the national level. For example UNDP has a youth Advisory Council that plays a supportive role. UNDP

sponsors training for young environmental leaders in the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Chapter 25 of Agenda 21, adopted at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, reads as follows:

"It is imperative that youth from all parts of the world participate actively in all relevant levels of, decision-making processes because it affects their lives today and has implications for their futures. In addition to their intellectual contribution and their ability to mobilize support, they bring unique perspectives that need to be taken into account"

Youth participation through governmental and non-governmental organizations is important, but there is a place for other kinds of youth action and activism as well. Environmentalism has many roots- in scientific concern for the well-being of resources and ecosystems, in philosophical reflections about nature, in concerns about public health, and in clubs involved initially in providing outdoor recreation opportunities. One particularly important root is the social movement. Along with feminism, environmentalism is the best example of the "New Social Movements" that gathered momentum in 1970's and in 1980's. New social movements are distinguished from their predecessors by the fact that they do not focus on issues of material distribution across social classes, nor do they organize with the intention of gaining a share of government power, but instead they care a great deal about identity (what it means to be an environmentalist) as well as strategy (how environmental goals are to be achieved). Their organizational form is often fluid, non-hierarchical and participatory. The political venue they emphasize is the public sphere rather than the state, and they are engaged in political association, action and discussion about public affairs that is not formally part of government.

More recently, protests such as those that erupted in Seattle at the 1999 WTO meetings and elsewhere have featured new kinds of youth activism. Unlike many previous movements, the WTO protestors had no semblance of a common programme. Some of their concerns related to the environmental effects of uncontrolled marketization, some to unfair labour practices and some to the rejection of capitalist principles. The "diversity" of the movement in terms of the issues, goals and backgrounds of the participants may itself herald a new kind of political form: the transnational network that does not seek unity, but instead operates on the principle of respect for diversity. The general point here is that each generation has the capacity to invent

new political forms, and it is always youth who take the lead because they are not subject to the established routines and stereotypes of their elders.

One aspect of innovation is the extent to which contemporary social movements are now transnational in character; they organize networks that span the globe. For example, the network against biopiracy brings activists in the developed world together with communities in developing countries exploited by transnational corporations, and universities taking advantage of indigenous knowledge into products they seek to patent without adequate compensation to the communities.

Strengthening the participation of youth in environmental protection is partly a matter of increasing opportunities in governmental organizations, established NGOs and restoration projects; partly a matter of youth themselves devising new forms of action, as the preceding examples of innovative activism make clear; and partly a question of more effective environmental education and media presentation of environmental issues.

Environmental Education:

Environmental education has an important role to play in the promotion of environmental awareness. The knowledge base of a society is one important aspect of its capacity to address and cope with environmental issues. Martin Janicke and Helmut Weidner write in this context, of "the conditions under which environmental knowledge is produced, distributed, interpreted and applied". Environmental education is the first step in enhancing this knowledge base.

A look at the existing state of environmental awareness and education indicates that the picture is at first glance quite positive, at least in most countries of the developed world. In developing countries, the picture is more mixed, though environmental education has made some inroads. Departments, institutes, programmes and courses devoted to environmental studies in science, social science, humanities, law and engineering have multiplied and flourished in colleges and universities in many countries.

Environmental education has grown steadily in recent years. However, question remains concerning its impact. During the past three decades there has been massive growth in environmental awareness in many countries, in formal environmental education, and in

educational activities of environmentalists- but has humanity come any closer to achieving a sustainable society? Over this period the consumer culture has become ever stronger, spread by economic globalization to all parts of the world. Individuals in developed countries who profess a commitment to environmental values often lead high-consumption and energy-inefficient lifestyles, drive large car if they can, travel long distance by airplane, live in ever more spacious houses, and do not recycle household wastes.

Why has environmental education so far failed to deliver the anticipated benefits? Part of the reason may lie in the kind of education delivered. Chet Bowers argues that environmental education in its present form is often provided in a way that does not challenge the dominant ways of thinking that evolved in the modern pre-environmental era of uncontrolled industrialism and has continued in the depersonalized individualism of the information age. Bowers recommends that students be encouraged "to do a cultural inventory of the forms of elder wisdom in their own community.... This should be followed by a discussion of the role of youth in the process of carrying forward and renewing the ecological and cultural wisdom of previous generations".

The real problem may lie not in the kind of environmental education being promoted, but rather in the difficulty involved in translating environmental value commitments into action of any kind, be it in terms of lifestyles adjustments or political activism. If so, the right kind of environmental education may not be enough to make much difference. It should be emphasized that environmental education, in its broadest and perhaps most important sense, is not formal schooling. Rather, it is a process of social learning in which young people and others are engaged in generating and transmitting knowledge as well as receiving it. Social learning involves a multitude of activities. NGOs can integrate education with their activism. Networks of activists can work together to explore and develop ideas – for instance, communicating how the whole idea of environmental justice arose, from the bottom up, and provided a variety of local experiences showing unfair distribution of environmental hazards.

The Role of Media in Social Learning about the Environment:

Much of the environmentally relevant information young people receive comes not from formal education but from the media. In principle, environmental education and the media could join in

a larger process of social learning, though the fact that the media are generally driven by concerns that are not educative can get in a way of such a synthesis.

The media can be a powerful tool for education. Good-quality environmental journalism is sometimes found in newspapers and magazines, especially those that have an environmental correspondent. Over time, this field has become increasingly professionalized. Growing professionalism notwithstanding, there are significant problems associated with the way environmental news is reported and interpreted. In general, if a journalist wants to make a splash, he or she is unlikely to report that an environmental risk is minimal or an ecological situation of no real concern. There is a tendency, especially when a new story is breaking, to overemphasize the seriousness of risk or disasters.

Some environmental hazards highlighted by the media in this manner become panics or scares that do not stand up to close analysis but do provide grist for those whose agenda is to minimize the severity of the risks that confront industrial society. Sensational coverage of risks by the media highlights the more general problem the media have in probing beneath the surface of events. The very essence of ecology is complex connections across time and space. When events are reported in isolation, the public receives disconnected and discontinuous message about bits of the environment- the opposite of ecological thinking. As former Green peace activist Chris Rose puts it."This is equivalent to covering economics by only reporting bank robberies". The media may be missing the most consequential developments of these times. Even media coverage of gatherings such as the World Summit on Sustainable Development tends to concentrate on the event itself and what happens there, with little nuanced coverage of the issues being debated.

This event focus may lead the public to dwell on and overestimate the significance of spectacular incidents- and consequently ignore long-term trends and chronic risks that pose a greater danger but rarely make the news. Aside from risk sensationalism, the media's penchant for the visible appealing and tangible comes into play in reporting on the destruction of nature. News about pandas, elephants, great apes or whales dying as a result of hunting or habitat destruction is easier to propagate and digest than more complex stories of ecosystem degradation.

The media emphasis on spectacles and events cannot be abolished, nor would this be altogether desirable, as it does at least help bring environmental issues to the public's attention. However, the environment-as-entertainment focus must be counterbalanced by deeper and more serious coverage, even if this appeals to only a minority in a world of short attention spans. Journalists need to be creative and investigative, not just reactive, in relation to events. There is no reason young people cannot develop their own publications and programmes along these lines, though their reach might be very limited in comparison with that of the mass media.

There is currently a huge gap between developed and developing countries in terms of media treatment of the environment. As Graham Chapman and others point out in their comparison of India and the United Kingdom, no shared commitment to environmentalism, or even a consensus on what environmentalism means, can emerge or be promoted by media operating in such vastly different and unequal conditions. The first challenge for the Indian media is to get the idea that "environmentalism" is yet post-colonial imposition from the developed world.

It may be concluded that the media are not living up to their potential as major contributors to social learning about the environment- environmental education in the broadest sense, which would enhance informed participation in environmental affairs by youth and others. To the extent that this is true, the media are failing youth along with everyone else. Part of the solution may involve the creation of alternative information networks that are not constrained by the need to entertain and can move beyond the event focus of the established media. The internet has enormous potential that is just beginning to be tapped, though at the moment there is considerable inequality in terms of access to this medium, which reinforces other sorts of material inequalities. It was noted earlier that youth have a proven talent for devising new forms of political action, and that a major recent trend has been the establishment of transnational activist networks. The potential for global environmental action and coordination is tremendous; however, the inaccessibility of the internet and other ICT resources to youth in the developing world has imposed serious limitations on their involvement in this process and has created an imbalance in terms of the kind of youth voices that got heard.

Conclusion:

Young people have important environmental concerns and responsibilities. Because of their longer life expectancy, they will have to live for quite some time with the consequences of deteriorating environment left to them by their parents. Fortunately youth have a special talent for invention and the development of new forms of action and activism and can generate more effective responses to environmental issues. Addressing the concerns of future generations is difficult in the context of present policy-making; ultimately, however, it is enough to expand time horizons not necessarily many years into the future, but simply beyond the generally short-term focus of current decision-making.

Environmental issues present some of the most profound and complex challenges requiring attention today and in the coming decades. One foundation-building step in enhancing local, regional, national and global capacities to respond to those challenges is increasing environmental awareness. Here the role of youth is central, for it is in the rising generations that heightened awareness can most easily be achieved. There is much work to be done in terms of reforming and extending both formal and informal environmental education and inducing the media to play a more effective role in facilitating social learning about the environment. Political activism on environmental issues is also crucial; again, youth are well-placed to develop new forms of activism and bring new energies and perspectives to environmental affairs.

Through their participation in the World Summit on Sustainable Development, young people recently demonstrated that they could inject social values and notions of equity into debate. Young people understand perhaps better than most that humankind is not living in a Zero-Sum, environment-versus-economy world. One way to equip young people to deal with environmental concerns is through more effective environmental education. Much of the information young people receive about environmental issues comes from the media. Therefore, environmental educators and the media should make greater and more concerted efforts to promote a larger process of social learning for sustainable development.

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