

Editorial

Environmental Education: Examining the Field

Marilyn Mac Donald claims, in her article on “Professionalization and Environmental Education,” that environmental education is still *in utero*. As a field of formal study for less than thirty years it is, according to this view, still in early stages of development. Her position is controversial. However, it does raise many profound questions about how we see our field—questions which provide a basis for vigorous and essential debate.

If, for example, environmental education is in early stages of development, is it appropriate to delineate its boundaries by standards? Stipulated definitions? And, how appropriate is it to professionalize such a young enterprise? Pursuing these questions not only requires us to re-examine conceptions of environmental education, but also fundamental assumptions about: how knowledge is constructed, transmitted, and controlled; the nature of human/nature relationships; and the complex interplay between objectivity and abstraction, and subjectivity and context. The first three articles directly address the questions posed above, though all of the authors in this volume seek to provoke assumptions which underlie our theories and practices of environmental education.

Arjen Wals and Tore van der Leij lead off this volume with their thoughts on “Alternatives to National Standards for Environmental Education.” They argue against attempting to standardize people’s realities and propose that more attention be given to the quality of learning processes. The issues they raise are probed further through three critiques provided by Robert Roth, Milton McClaren, and Claude Crozier and Marianne von Frenckell. In the final segment of this dialogue, Wals and van der Leij respond to their critics with a brief rejoinder.

The papers that follow, Marilyn Mac Donald’s on professionalization and mine on rethinking “How We Define” environmental education, both explore conceptual questions critical to development of environmental education. Again, implications of standardization—of professional conduct and our very definition of environmental education—are critiqued.

The next sequence of four papers examine, and/or demonstrate, narratives and their importance in shaping consciousness at the busy intersection of nature and culture. They also challenge us to accept a broadened scope for research in environmental education.

Andrew Stables, in "The Landscape and the 'Death of the Author'," draws on research traditions of literary criticism to explore interactions between author, reader, landscape and text, and their importance in shaping consciousness. Michael Brody and Anne Bell both employ autobiographical research in the production of their narratives. Brody's "Descending the Watershed: Rethinking the 'Place' of Curriculum" uses a first person phenomenological approach to examine relationships between narratives of personal experience, reality of the environment, and lived experience of "place." In "Natural History From a Learner's Perspective," Bell ultimately argues for a fully embodied participation with the more-than-human world in response to fragmented, rationalistic, and decontextualized schooling. Noel Gough provides a post-structuralist ecopolitical critique in "Weather™ Incorporated: Environmental Education, Postmodern Identities, and Technocultural Constructions of Nature." Using weather reporting as a metaphor for examining narrative complexities generated by concepts such as self, culture, nature, and artefact, he implores environmental educators to attend more to the micro-politics of subjective life.

The final two papers concern themselves with thoughtfulness. Benoit Gauthier, Louise Guilbert, and Marc Pelletier describe what they believe to be the emergence of a new paradigm of environmental education practice. Their paper about "Soft Systems Methodology and Problem Framing" emphasizes reflexivity and social processes of change. They make a case for employing aspects of soft systems methodologies to aid thoughtfulness at the problem formation stage. Robert Stevenson, drawing on instances of action research, focuses on the importance of "Developing Habits of Environmental Thoughtfulness." This, he argues, is best done through authentic in-depth study of a few environmental issues.

As Wals and van der Leij remind us, there is always a lot of work still to be done. I hope, as do they, that the debates and challenges provided in this volume will engage the environmental education community and help our field to develop.