

# Issues of Inclusion in Developing Environmental Education Policy: Reflections on B.C. Experiences

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## **Abstract**

The commitments which Canada took on in signing the United Nation's Agenda 21 agreement include developing our own national action plan for environmental education. In this article, we discuss some highlights (and low lights) in the recent history of environmental education policy development in British Columbia to illuminate some of the likely costs involved, and problems to be dealt with, in any attempt to reach national agreement on environmental education in Canada. The challenges include confronting the limits of bureaucratic, multi-stakeholder processes, and wrestling with questions of inclusion, access, and "Who is to count as an environmental educator?"

## **Résumé**

Les engagements que le Canada a pris en signant l'accord des Nations Unies sur Action 21 englobent l'établissement de notre propre plan d'action national pour l'éducation relative à l'environnement (ERE). Dans cet article, nous discutons des points saillants (et moins saillants) de l'histoire récente de l'élaboration de la politique de l'ERE en Colombie-Britannique, afin de mettre en lumière certains problèmes à résoudre dans toute tentative d'obtenir un accord sur l'ERE au Canada, ainsi que les coûts connexes probables. Les défis à relever sont, notamment, les limites des processus bureaucratiques et multipartites et les questions d'inclusion, d'accès et " qui peut compter parmi les éducateurs environnementaux? "

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## The Question

“Can we agree on some national principles for environmental education?”

*An answer*

Sometimes the best way to answer a “Can we?” question is to go ahead and try. “Can we collect enough money to help the foodbank through the summer months?” “Can we make this relationship work better?” Questions like these are sometimes best interpreted as invitations, and best answered by going ahead and trying. But before we do, we would like to discuss a question that we think is logically prior to it. This is the question:

*Should we try to come to agreement on some national principles for environmental education?*

To share our thoughts about this and related questions, we have written this paper in a quasi-dialogue/edited interview form. It was generated by a short conversation that grew.

*Pamela:* I’ll begin with introductions to help indicate where our considerations are coming from. I am an Assistant Professor in Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia. I am, or have been involved in, environmental education as a mother, volunteer, teacher, teacher-educator, writer, philosopher, storyteller, educational researcher, and recently, to a minor extent, as a participant in policy and curriculum development consultations. Steve is involved in almost all of the above ways as well, and he is also a grade 6/7 teacher in a large inner city elementary school in Vancouver. He has been active in environmental education policy and curriculum development for more than eight years, and he has put in a tremendous amount of work and time trying to help get environmental education going at the grassroots level. He has initiated more workshops, conferences and curriculum development projects (with and without official backing) than can fit on a two-page listing. He has also been the major driving force behind the recent formation of the British Columbia Environmental Educators’ Society and behind the recent resurgence of the Environmental Educators Provincial Specialist Association, an association affiliated with the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation and now in its 25<sup>th</sup> year. He is also near completion of his M.A. thesis (Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University) on the effects of school architecture and

design on teaching and learning. Steve accomplishes all this in his spare time, of course . . . after the bell goes and on weekends.

Now the question, “*Should we try* to come to agreement on some national principles for environmental education?”

*Should we try?*

*Pamela:* I must confess at the outset that this question arises for me out of a tempered but enduring hesitancy about the dynamics of large-scale discussions and about the value of national declarations on matters so resistant to full participation and so regionally and locally variant as environmental education. It’s not that I don’t think large-scale discussion can be worthwhile. And, it’s not that I don’t think that there are some important principles that are embraced, or that ought to be reckoned with by environmental educators across Canada. It’s just that too often, I have seen discussions about policy formation get deflected by personal agendas, by organizational agendas, and by ambitions for social positioning whose obviousness can be astounding. Amid such deflections, concerns about how to make things go better in the world can end up having too tenuous a presence, and the whole thing can leave one wondering if it’s time to search for a leaner ship to join. There is a lot of work to be done to make environmental education happen more and happen better in Canadian public schools. I’m just not sure off the bat that nationally organized dialogues to arrive at consensus on the nature and goals of environmental education are the best way to get us there. Nor am I sure they are the best use of public funds.

But that is the retreating dreamer in me. When I call up the pragmatic social realist in me, I recognize that tussling with all these competing agendas is exactly what needs to happen—people arguing with each other, hearing each other out, recognizing each other’s competing interests and conflicting standpoints, and through it all, being exposed to challenges and expansions in their thinking about what environmental education is, how it can be done, and what environmental educators ought to be trying to accomplish. Some may go home at the end of the day still glued to their agendas and even reinforced as a result of having tried to press it on others. But others may go home transformed in their thinking, stirred in their sense of possibilities, or newly inspired in their day-to-day work.

So I want to keep open-minded about the value of chartered large-scale discussions. There may be as much good to be achieved as there is chaff to be put in the compost.

## **Problems From Past History: Too Thin to be Meaningful, too Dispersed to Come Alive**

*Pamela:* I have yet another reason for skepticism, and this concerns:

- how readily a large series of discussions organized on a national scale can involve so much compromise that the agreements that come out of it are too thin to be meaningful, and
- how readily a large bureaucratically organized series of discussions can fractionate into a scattering of isolated parts destined to fossilize as fragments rather than connect up with each other into a living, breathing dialectical whole.

*Steve:* The first problem, the problem of agreements too thin to be meaningful, is exactly what I experienced in the British Columbia “Environmental Concepts in the Classroom” project. The discussions that I participated in were very valuable for me and I would like to think that they were very valuable for everyone who participated. But the final document that came out of it was thin and seems to have grown thinner over time. The document had a bit of a life for a short period of time after it came out. But now, although people refer to the title of it and recognize its symbolic importance, I have difficulty imagining that anyone actually consults it for guidance related to how to go about doing environmental education.

The “Environmental Concepts in the Classroom” project was the culmination of a series of discussions that the B.C. Ministry of Education organized in the early 1990s in response to the federal Ministry of the Environment’s “Round Table on Sustainable Development.” The ultimate goal of the B.C. Ministry of Education project was to promote and facilitate the integration of environmental education into the provincial curriculum. This goal eventually transmogrified into the objective of producing a guidebook intended “to help teachers of all subjects and grades to integrate environmental concepts into their daily lesson plans” (Ministry of Education, 1995, p. 3). The document that finally came out of this project was *Environmental Concepts in the Classroom* (1995). The development of that document was coordinated by an inter-ministry working group led by Susan Cuelho (Ministry of Education), Rick Kool (Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks) and David Denning (Ministry of Education). Nine school districts sent representatives to work on the Development Committee. I (Steve) served as one of those delegates, representing the School District of Vancouver.

*Pamela:* The second problem with large-scale discussions organized by a bureaucratic agency is what we might call a tendency to decay into the “dinosaur bones” model of communication. This is something that I experienced in my own first involvement in environmental education policy development discussions.

It happened in connection with the B.C. Ministry of Education’s draft environmental education policy document back in 1993. The Ministry had asked University of British Columbia’s Faculty of Education to review the draft document and give them feedback by a certain date. John Willinsky, then-Director of University of British Columbia’s Centre for the Study of Curriculum, duly put together a committee to review and discuss the document. We met, talked, and shared notes, which John then duly wove together into a collaborative response that was sent off at the appointed time. Despite remarks from more experienced colleagues about the wheel-spinning that such processes can involve, I felt very enthusiastic about the document that we had received (despite some criticisms we had of it) and very enthusiastic about the chances that it might be made even stronger as a result of the critical feedback that we and other reviewers were sending in.

But a year and a half later, I met one of the key people involved in the Ministry Committee developing this policy document, who told me that he unfortunately never saw our review of the draft document: many changes in Ministry personnel had resulted in some interruptions of communication flows. The Ministry official did a wonderful job explaining without excusing the Ministry changes and bureaucratic realities that had made continuity difficult. Nevertheless, I was disheartened. The process did seem to have resulted in spinning wheels, just as my colleagues had warned me. Thinking back on the document we produced, another metaphor came to mind: “dinosaur bones” fossilizing in place. But worse than a fossilized bone fragment, our review, and perhaps many others, had never even once had the chance *to be part of* a larger living, breathing, dialectical whole.

But this wasn’t all there was to be said about it. Our *chance* to be involved in the process and the conversations in which we had engaged had been truly inspiring and educative to me (and perhaps to a few of the other people involved in the review, though I think I was the most green-eared of the lot). It is in this sense that the *illusion* of participation had given me a sense of what genuine participation might yield. So despite my disappointment at what this spinning wheel incident suggested about the process of policy development, I had nevertheless, sensed enough possibility of useful outcomes to imagine that the huge and expensive rounds of

consultations that the Ministry had organized had likely come to some good beyond whatever document it would produce. Having worked most of my academic life entirely in isolation (out in the country in southwestern Ontario; isolation has its consolations), this episode was my first experience of that wondrous synergy that can happen when a group of well-meaning people working on a similar problem get together to think in collaboration with each other. I was swept away by the experience.

*Steve:* Not only this, but your discussions are still with you as they are with others, and they are being revived as you write this case example. You have learned through the process and you carry that learning forward as you write about it. The document may become irrelevant, but your experiences and learning will not.

*Pamela:* Yes, and this is important when it comes to the question, “Should we try to come to agreement on some national principles for environmental education?” Not only considerations about the product, but also these considerations about process—positive and negative both—should come into play. We can’t answer the “Should we try?” question responsibly without addressing the questions of what kind of processes would be involved, how productive such processes have been in past endeavours, and how they might be arranged to go better.

I strongly believe that we need light shed on these questions from a variety of standpoints: from people who are widely experienced as *organizers* of large-scale educational policy discussions, from people who are widely experienced as *participants* in large-scale educational policy discussions, and especially, from people whose standpoint is firmly on the ground—people who are involved in the discussions as teachers and environmental educators whose involvement may well fall outside of their job description and be far from facilitated by their jobs, because many people centrally engaged in environmental education are likely to be accidentally but effectively excluded from participation by lack of time or opportunity to get involved.

For me, this concern goes to the heart of my feelings about the question of a national framework. I think that the question of who participates (even when stakeholder groups are identified and funding support given) is all too often answered by the unplanned and unrecognized criteria revealed in the never asked question, “Who has enough privilege in terms of time, connections, and opportunity to be able to participate?” I think this happens *often despite* strong efforts to make this not be so.<sup>1</sup> I want to see a

different set of criteria determine how these things go, criteria reflected in questions like, “Who is systematically if inadvertently excluded from participation in environmental education discussions?” (we discuss this issue in the pages ahead), and, “Who is already working to make significant contributions on the ground?”

This latter question/criterion is why I asked Steve to share his thoughts with me about this question of agreement on national principles for environmental education. Steve didn’t plan to contribute directly to the colloquium because his teaching and activist commitments are leading him elsewhere this week. He and his colleagues in Environmental Educators Provincial Specialist Association have organized a conference for the weekend of October 23 at McQueen Lake. this fall retreat is for B.C. teachers and environmental educators interested to get together to share experiences, resources, and ideas. These are the days of finalizing logistics, so a hasty interview seemed the best bet for getting input from Steve—which is how this article began.

### **Getting Environmental Education Discourse out of Little Boxes**

*Steve:* Should we try to come up with a national framework for environmental education? My answer to this question is yes. Like it or not, we work in social systems that are hierarchically organized, so we need representation within those hierarchies. Environmental education needs to be recognized symbolically within them, so that different echelons can correspond—so that one layer or one level can communicate with another about environmental education.

*Pamela:* And so that different levels will *have to* communicate with each other about environmental education; that is, so that environmental education can’t drop out of official recognition at any level.

*Steve:* That’s our system. If we had a different system, I might respond in a different way. If the system truly supported implementation of grass-roots initiatives in environmental education, this discussion would have a different focus. But first we must talk about keeping the dialogue regarding environmental education and its guidelines and implementation processes active at the top ends of the educational hierarchy. It isn’t there at this present time. And, the consequences of this void are strongly felt by educators in the field through the current lack of funding and support for implementation. An example of this communication/organizational problem is



that the B.C. Education Ministry has spent millions of dollars re-constructing curriculum frameworks and guidelines, but has not maintained correspondence with teachers and educators on its implementation. The *Environmental Concepts in the Classroom* (1995) document is a case in point, where the ministry has not continued an effective correspondence between practising educators, academics, and Ministry personnel on the implementation of the guidelines.

*Pamela:* Yes, the Ministry did try to get environmental education curriculum integration going several years ago by contracting a group to develop a proposal for implementation. I was a participant in these discussions in the summer of 1997. But I think one of the problems with this endeavour—just as you point out—was that no longer-term provisions were made for continuing discussion. The funding and time scale were too small for anything very substantive to develop in terms of networks or in terms of curriculum integration strategies and resource listings. As you say, no forwarding process.

*Steve:* It's important that whatever principles are articulated, they take shape not in the form of dogmatic and mandated curriculum requirements, but rather in the form of a mission statement, a statement of the values involved in environmental education. The establishment of national principles should be understood to be a *valuing of environmental education as an enterprise*. And, a valuing of the contributions it can make to education as a whole. The principles must also reflect the need for discourse and development within environmental education, and spur involvement and curriculum development. But the mandate and mission must engage people at all levels of national, regional and local agencies. And it must be practised—lived. This is not about constructing a set of rhetorical statements; it's about developing principles for human actions and decisions within environments. It cannot be definite nor absolute; it must be lived to be understood. And then, it can, and probably will, be changed. Living it will teach us how, and when, it needs to be changed. Living it will change it. Environmental education is about life in all of its diverse manifestations—biological, ecological, cultural, and social—and its developments and its dialogues must likewise reflect inherent processes of flux and change.

Environmental education needs recognition. That's what we worked so hard for in developing the B.C. Ministry of Education policy document. But the product, the document that came out of three weeks of stimulating discussion with 12 people, is unlikely to inspire anyone. It says very little, the writing in it is somewhat poorly organized, and the document as a whole



is difficult to understand. It is of little use to people who go to it for guidance in integrating environmental education into their curriculum. (See below for a brief critical outline of the document.) It is a superficial statement cobbled into a problematic format that the committee members who wrote it argued long and hard to discard. But it wasn't discarded because the document had to fit with pre-given directives. These directives weren't ours to question, and so we ended up with a document that has been shoved into a ridiculously little box with many of the definitive edges snipped off to make it fit. Pull it out of the box and you will see something so full of holes and ragged ideas that many of the understandings and sensitivities that went in are now almost completely unrecognizable.

On the other hand, policy-wise, it's all there is. Achieving the acceptance of a document that states that environmental education should be integrated into every part of the Ministry's Integrated Resource Package curriculum is a great thing. And, what is more, it is now there in Section C of every one of the Ministry's over 100 prescribed curriculum Integrated Resource Package's under the heading "Environment and Sustainability." Before *Environmental Concepts in the Classroom* (1995), there was no Ministry policy document of any type in support of environmental education. Now, at least there is a foundation, however tenuous it may appear.

### **The B.C. Policy Document (1995)**

*Pamela:* Let me offer this brief critical description for readers unfamiliar with the document which we are discussing. *Environmental Concepts in the Classroom: A Guide for Teachers* (B.C. Ministry of Education, 1995) is a 20 page document that introduces six principles for integrating environmental concepts into the classroom. These principles are:

1. Direct experience is the basis of learning.
2. Responsible action is integral to, and a consequence of, environmental education.
3. Life on Earth depends on, and is part of, complex systems.
4. Human decisions and actions have environmental consequences.
5. Environmental awareness enables students to develop an aesthetic appreciation of the environment.
6. The study of the environment enables students to develop an environmental ethic.

(For further discussion, see the article by Hart, Jickling, and Kool in this volume.)

Each of these principles receives roughly a page or a half-page discussion in the document, and the remainder of the document contains various appendices.

Appendix A is a sample theme study unit whose first unit, “Consumerism,” begins with the observation that “Consumerism is a cornerstone of western culture.” Unfortunately, this Appendix, in its finally edited form, doesn’t manage to suggest much explicit critical perspective on this fact. Nowhere does it mention the problem of the transformation of western political awareness from the citizen model to the consumer model, whereby the importance of participating in democratic processes and engaging in action for structural reform can become eclipsed by the discourse of “consumer-voting.” The problem of responsible social action being reduced to the making of well-informed purchases—i.e., “the privatization of environmental morality” (Sandilands, 1993)—is a problem that slips notice in this unit on consumerism.

The unit achieves its maximally critical perspective on consumerism by listing “distinction between needs and wants” and “exploration of ethical implications of research analysis and choices made by investment corporations” under the integrated curriculum areas of “Business Education, Technology Education, Social Studies, and Home Economics” (Ministry of Education, 1995, p. 11). But it says nothing more about them. The document is that slim. There are no explanations or examples given, no ideas of curriculum resources or instructional strategies suggested. Of course, the document is a guideline, not a curriculum resource, so it would be unrealistic to expect too much detail. But it needs at least some elaboration of where to go with these concepts. And it needs more explicit discussion of critical perspectives on consumerism so that teachers and students are not encouraged to think only from within that model. Any teacher uncritical of consumerism gets little help from this unit outline, and any teacher looking for suggestions of how to explore these topics in curriculum-integrated ways finds no suggestions.

My first time reading this *Guide*—which was well before I had met many of the people involved in its development—I had the distinct impression that the critical hints within it linked up to more thoroughgoing critical considerations not all of which could make it through the vetting process involved in producing such a document. If this is the case, then this is certainly a loss to those of us concerned to maximize reflective thinking in our schools . . . because reflective thinking requires that students consider all perspectives on an issue; for example, perspectives from people who embrace consumerism, perspectives from people who encourage individ-

ual responsibility within a consumerist model, and perspectives from people who critique consumerism. It requires also that students engage in class, race, culture, and gender analyses of these discourses. We've got a long way to go. But the *Guide* does acknowledge elsewhere that educators should help students to critically appreciate "a range of perspectives and viewpoints" (Appendix C), and it does acknowledge that environmental education should help students to understand "the relationships between human rights, justice, race, and gender equity, and the environment" (p. 8). As Steve has pointed out, the document is a great achievement despite the problems of process and framework limitation that were part of its development. It puts the B.C. Ministry of Education on record as saying:

- that environmental education should be integrated across the curriculum,
- that environmental education consists of much more than just environmental studies conceived on the model of the natural sciences;
- that environmental education should provide opportunities for students to examine their values and "question cultural assumptions that lead to social conflict or environmental crisis," and
- that environmental education should help enable students "to take responsible action" (Principle 2), "to develop awareness of diverse cultural perceptions and interpretations of the environment," "to explore and develop positive approaches to long-range environmental concerns" (Principle 4), "to develop an aesthetic appreciation of the environment" (Principle 5), and "to develop an environmental ethic" (Principle 6).

*Steve:* It took money from the government to fund the series of discussions that led up to *Environmental Concepts in the Classroom*. The one that I took part in spanned three weeks, and the process of engaging in those discussions was very valuable, as I said earlier. But again, there was no provision for long term continuing expression of those dialogues. And the document itself is too thin to serve as a connection for people who weren't a part of that process. In any case, a document is not a living entity unless people bring it to life. I sincerely doubt this document could inspire anyone on its own. If the document serves as an impetus to further discussion then this is a very valuable rationale for producing a framework document. Unfortunately, we don't see that happening at present.

## Problems of Marginalization in Environmental Education

*Steve:* As suggested earlier, a big national discussion with overarching statements will likely have serious problems of inclusiveness. It won't include anyone not participant to that discussion. And whether people who actually do participate are heard or not heard depends upon their eloquence and their ability to have their ideas heard by the group. Some will be heard more loudly than others. It's important to have ways to increase this dialogue. But it takes a great deal of effort. It takes money and people to conduct the discussions, and venues to hold the discussions in.

From my experience, this discourse is extremely complex and problematic. There is so much potential ideology and subjective interpretation involved. The language is a huge problem for many people, and many cultural groups have been effectively excluded from participation in discussions and from having influence on environmental education. For example, when you take a look around at any environmental education conference in Canada, the people you see are primarily caucasian, and many people active in environmental education are from middle-class backgrounds.

*Pamela:* The privileged nature of environmental education discussions with respect to race, class, culture, gender, and disability has at least begun to get recognition in the past decade. There have been steadily increasing efforts to counteract problems of marginalization. For example, the "Colloquium on Environment, Ethics, and Education" held at Yukon College in 1995 was designed to give central focus to the sharing of local indigenous perspectives on environment, ethics and education, along with perspectives from mainstream nationally or internationally recognized environmental philosophers, social scientists or educational theorists. Most of the latter group were from Canada, the U.S. and Australia, and most were—not surprisingly, given western academic history—white. But local indigenous perspectives were at the centre of the Colloquium, and the work begun at the Colloquium (see Jickling, 1996) and continued in this journal has helped to change the contours of national recognition in Canada, so that, for example, there is now a steadily increasing number of mainstream-nationally recognized aboriginal scholars in environmental education in Canada.

This kind of progress is also reflected in the past two annual conferences of the North American Association for Environmental Education. The 1997 conference, held at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, was entitled "Weaving Connections: Cultures and Environments—Environmental

Education and the Peoples of the World.” It focused on the cultural embeddedness of understandings of environment and education, and it was designed to achieve cultural and racial diversity in presentations and participation. Conference Chairs Rick Kool and Rick Mrazek reported that “the element of inclusivity” was “an important force” in the design of the conference. They and other conference organizers consulted with “multicultural groups, immigrant-serving agencies and First Nations from the Vancouver area” to help “make the conference culturally sensitive and relevant to their members . . . ”<sup>2</sup> The 1998 North American Association for Environmental Education conference held in Atlanta, Georgia focused on environmental education in inner city districts. So, awareness of issues of class, race, and culture in environmental education is growing, and efforts to broaden participation are ongoing. But of course, conference demographics continue to indicate that we have a long way to go.

The problems of marginalization or exclusion are especially important for aboriginal people in Canada because of the importance of aboriginal reclaiming of education against the history of cultural genocide in Canada, and because of the challenges of dealing with (often unwitting) cultural appropriation and pan-Indianism by well-meaning white educators (these issues are respectively addressed by Boyko, 1995; Kawagley et al., 1995; Smith, 1992). These problems no doubt have their parallels in many other countries around the world.

The discourses of *environmental ethics and philosophy* have also needed and received such de-centering critique—“criticism from the margins,” one might say, except that it’s not clear if this descriptor is adequate. I’m concerned that a class and race analysis of journal publications on these issues may show that most of the criticisms published in mainstream environmental ethics and philosophy journals have been done by white middle class academics, and not “from the margins” at all. The present essay is yet another example of this phenomenon, at least insofar as I am a white now middle-class academic. Whether this academic *noblesse oblige* masks continuing problems of exclusion is an open and important question, which I cannot take on here.<sup>3</sup> In any case, until the late 1980s, the discourses of environmental ethics and philosophy gave much less focus and space to problems of social and global justice compared with the focus and space they gave to dominant concerns about respect for nature—how respect for nature is justified, what it entails, etc. This imbalance has begun to turn around in recent years. Recent research has explored the white, middle-class, and gendered roots of nature and wilderness preservation movements (Cronon, 1996; Guha, 1989; Salleh, 1993), and more and more attention is

being given to issues of social and global justice in environmental matters (Bullard, 1995; Salleh, 1993; Shiva, 1993; Wenz & Westra, 1996). This change is reflected in the emergence of the latest watchword in environmental thought, “environmental justice.” It is important that these developments and the issues that underlie them be addressed in environmental education, for these problems of social/cultural bias in the academic world reflect similar problems in dominant society generally.

*Steve:* Because of these problems of marginalization, discussion of environmental education at national levels has a strong tendency to be exclusive and elitist. It would be great if we could overcome these problems. In any case, at the local and community level it cannot be this way and be effective. If people are going to “buy in” to the changes that environmental education potentially illuminates, they are going to have to be involved in the discourse at some level; they must be actively involved for environmental learning to work. And, of course, by being “actively involved” I mean participating through dialogue and the development of their own actions and learning as well.

What makes framework generation worthwhile is if it provides an impetus for discussions to carry on independently after the framework has been produced. This is what we are doing in the Environmental Educators Provincial Specialist Association, but we do it in a very grassroots way. We don’t have special funding from the government, though we have received grants for workshops. This may be the most productive and legitimate way to do this, as opposed to a specific discussion. But we are small as an organization. Out of 40,000 teachers in B.C., only 100, or so, belong to our organization. Our small size illustrates the problem of developing a dialogue from the grassroots. It is hard to imagine a national discussion ever arising without government level recognition and support.

I’m not sure what role the federal, or provincial, governments need to play. Perhaps this is another question that needs to be discussed. Where is this all going to? The goal is to help make people aware of what others are doing in the field of environmental education—what people are doing on sustainability, what people are doing on connections to place, whatever people are doing in any area that they think of as being part of environmental education. But I do strongly feel that more support is needed and that the current level of discourse is inadequate to institute environmental education on a large scale in our schools.

*Pamela:* So “can we agree on some national principles for environmental education?”

*Steve:* I would interpret “Can we?” as “Is it possible to?” Is it possible to agree on national principles? My feeling about this is yes and no and maybe. “Yes” we can, if we think/agree that it is essential that it be done. “No” we can’t if we expect this agreement to be fully accepted by all equally. And, “Maybe” depending on whether such a discussion is ever begun, who it is begun by, and who is involved in it. And, of course,—Who is “we”?

But most important to this question is the act of discussing it. The solutions do *not* lie necessarily in formulating agreements, but in the dialogues, discourses, and understandings developed along the way. An agreement will best be the starting point, or a catalyst to a further round of discourses. It is not an absolute or final result, only a statement at the end of a stage of a perpetual process of discourse. “Can we?” Yes. Are the principles final? No, and they shouldn’t try to be.

### **A Perspective from Dave Denning, Formerly with the B.C. Ministry of Education**

*Pamela:* I spoke also with Dave Denning, one of the central players in the development of B.C. environmental education policy in the early 1990s. Dave explained that one of the central frustrations in his work for the Ministry of Education was that several of the boards he had to work with didn’t recognize environmental education as an existing form of educational praxis and knew very little about it (telephone conversation, October 22, 1998). They developed policy declarations that ignored the history and growth of environmental education that had already taken place in the province of British Columbia. In the case of the Round Table Committee on Sustainable Learning, Dave expressed the concern that the committee didn’t reflect specifically *anything* going on in environmental education at the time. There were concerns, expressed throughout environmental education communities, that the ideas collected through widespread community consultations were not receiving adequate consideration. Dave shared these concerns. As one example, he pointed out that the Environmental Educators Provincial Specialist Association (the British Columbia Teacher Federation’s provincial specialist association on environmental education) produced a large number of very helpful position papers on environmental education for the committee, but consideration of them was not reflected in the committee’s deliberations and report. The result? Real consultation with environmental educators and teachers was not achieved, and the document that was produced was not effective because it didn’t mesh with environmental education as practised.



Finally, Dave pointed out that one of the other major structural problems in environmental education policy generation during the early 1990s was that there was no one in the B.C. Ministry of Education whose mandate was specifically for environmental education. He was often sent to work with various committees as a Ministry of Education representative very interested in environmental education, but he lacked an official mandate for environmental education, and this limited what he could do. (Again, the importance of recognizing environmental education within our hierarchies, as Steve pointed out.) There has only ever been one person whose mandate was specifically for environmental education in B.C., and that is Rick Kool, who worked then as environmental education coordinator for the Ministry of the Environment, Lands and Parks. Dave concluded our discussion by noting Rick's brilliance in making a lot of things happen during this period, but unfortunately, the position Rick held has been terminated by the Ministry of the Environment, and he has been re-assigned to another area. This was a big step backwards for environmental education. There is now no one officially assigned responsibility for coordinating environmental education in B.C.

Dave Denning left the B.C. Ministry of Education in 1994. His comments on the recent history of environmental education policy generation reflect the importance of ensuring that practising environmental educators and teachers are genuinely and substantially involved in policy generation, and that policy documents connect with current environmental education praxis. Viewpoints from other people who have worked on environmental education policy development—in B.C. and elsewhere—would be valuable to have. We regret that we could not engage in full-scale research to do interviews with a wide and diverse sample of the people who have taken part in the particular policy development projects described in this essay, but we hope that this essay can help serve as a catalyst toward those further conversations.

### **Conclusion: From B.C. Experiences to the UN Agenda 21 Challenge**

*Pamela:* On the basis of recent experiences of environmental education policy generation in B.C., we have argued that the question of who participates—and how much power they each have—is key to the question, “*Should we try to come to agreement on some national principles for environmental education?*” These issues of inclusion are key as well to the question, “*Can we agree on some national principles for environmental education?*” . . . for obvious reasons. Agreement around any table depends

upon who comes to the table, and how much power each person has. These issues are thus crucial to the question of how Canada should respond to the commitments it took on in signing Agenda 21 (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, 1992). Some background first.

As Ann Jarnet of Environment Canada has explained, Agenda 21 is the international agreement to which Canada was a signatory nation after the UN 1992 Conference on the environment and development. The United Nations subsequently set up a Commission on Sustainable Development to monitor how countries were responding to the commitments they had made. That Commission asked UNESCO to serve as “Task Manager” to help develop the additional “structure” needed for countries to meet the commitments related to environmental education (which occur in Chapter 36 and elsewhere in the other 39 chapters of Agenda 21).

In 1996, UNESCO agreed to lead in the creation of international alliances for environmental education or ‘education for sustainability.’ It also asked nations to promote networks on education and training particularly at the grass-roots level, and to develop their own national action plans for “education for sustainable development” (Jarnet, 1998, p. 213). Pointing out that in Canada, education is a provincial affair, Ann asks, “Les provinces et les autres intervenants seraient-ils disposés à rédiger leurs propres plans d’action et à accepter qu’ils soient intégrés à un cadre national dont on conviendrait à l’avance?” (Roughly translated, “Would the provinces and other intervenors be agreeable to drawing up their own action plans and accept their integration into a national framework agreed upon in advance?”)

Reflecting on the course of environmental education policy development in B.C., I must admit, my first reaction is: “Here we go again!” But my considered view on the matter is much more positive. International agreements on environmental education are important for reasons related to those which Steve pointed out in connection with national agreements: they symbolize the importance of environmental education, they spur communication about it, and they press those who lag behind to take environmental education more seriously. This is particularly important for any countries where recognition and communication about human impacts on the earth needs improvement (which I suspect is most).

The “Here we go again!” flavour is also strongly present in the terminology of “educating for sustainability” and “educating for sustainable development” which appear in the agreement. Recognizing potential problems, Ann asks, “Are these terms blueprints for a particular type of action

which may actually constrain our possibilities?" (Jarnet, 1998, p. 214). I suspect that most environmental educators have problems with the term "education for sustainable development" (see for example, Orr 1992; Jickling 1992). If this is true, and if we are to avoid problems of misinformed policy generation of the sort that Dave and Steve described in the development of B.C. environmental education policy, then Canada's national framework will need to reflect this dispute with Agenda 21 or with UNESCO formulations, preferably in ways that illuminate the problems and propose better conceptualizations.

What we might need to do first, then, taking wing on Ann's recognition of the importance of consulting with environmental educators ("l'un des principaux groupes d'intervenants que l'on doit consulter au cours des discussions sur le chapitre 36") is to develop a systematic survey (qualitative and quantitative) of environmental educators across Canada, explaining the formulations of Chapter 36 and pursuant UNESCO elaborations, and asking their views. One of the key steps in such a study is, of course, identifying who is to count as an environmental educator—in ways cognizant of the problems of marginalization that have limited previous discussions. But we will need also to recognize that decisions about the proper aims of environmental education in Canada are not decisions to be made entirely by practitioners alone—they concern (or should concern) all Canadians. So we will need to reflect on how to help this dialogue expand—in ways that are productive, inclusive, informed, and sustainable.

*Steve:* From my perspective, as someone who works daily with kids, teachers, school administrators, academics, bureaucrats, corporations, non-government organizations, and the public at large, everyone counts as an environmental educator. Environmental education, after all, isn't just about what we think or say about the environment, but more importantly how our actions and standards of living impact on Earth's ecology. Schools, in particular, need to go beyond focusing primarily on the human cognitive and affective domains, to appreciating how the institutionalization of education impacts on the physical and ecological domains of this planet.

Our society today is caught up in a relentless treadmill educating people to consume more than they need, or maybe even really want. Advertising has become such a pervasive part of our culture, that we don't see it as the sinister purveyor of the most anti-ecological myths ever created—that our desires need be bounded only by the limits of human imagination! By isolating students from direct experiences in the natural world, our education system shares in perpetuating these myths of limit-

less progress and growth. Then, we further claim that new, as yet unheard of, technologies will eventually “teach” the land to produce and absorb infinitely more than it is presently capable of sustaining. Surely these perspectives of “environmental education” are no less significant, although more ecologically suspect, than acting to preserve healthy forests and streams. It’s the old problem of conflicting cultural paradigms, and I just don’t see our educational institutions as major movers in addressing this issue openly.

The act of not only envisioning, but implementing a set of principles that would stand to benefit the nation in ways “environmental educators” might intend, raises a specter of inevitable controversy. To move beyond this will require producing educational principles that, in themselves, seek to reflect ecological connections and patterns—the valuing of diversity, the recognition of all parts, the acceptance of tension and flux in processes of change, and so on. For the ecology of the land, the land ethic as Aldo Leopold called it, to ever become imbued in the collective consciousness, the collective actions, and for our purposes here, the educational institutions of our culture, will surely require the evolution of a new ecology of learning. This would include a new perspective of the role of participant learners. Let’s face it, everyone’s a learner when it comes to moments of social change.

But to get there, in fact just get our educational institutions started on the long road to diminishing the most blatantly unsustainable values of our culture, will take a much louder wake-up call than we have hitherto heard. And that, I believe, is where we as environmental “teachers” and “educators” in the contemporary sense of these terms, need to be much more involved.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Thus the common frustration among teachers evinced by this remark: “As classroom teachers, we often feel that theory is formulated by those who are well-rested and is implemented by those who are not. This tends to make us a cynical lot; as we heave new curriculums out of our mailboxes, we joke, “Have it read and in place by Monday!” Twila Konyonenbelt, as quoted in *ForEd BC’s Landscapes*, Vol. IV (Fall, 1998). This criticism may not be entirely true (I know very few curriculum developers who would describe themselves as well-rested), but it communicates a perception of distance between curriculum developers and teachers that is widespread among teachers and important to address.

<sup>2</sup>Quotations from Kool and Mrazek, 1997 and from the 1997 North American Association for Environmental Education Conference *Call for Presentations*.

<sup>3</sup>For discussion of the general concerns involved in privileged people speaking for marginalized people, see Alcoff, 1991, hooks, 1990, and Scheman, 1993.

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