

CONSERVATION EDUCATION

by
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The original title of this contribution was to have been the role of museums in nature and environmental conservation. However, I came to the conclusion that it was impossible to discuss this in isolation, hence simply the title Conservation Education.

We are dealing with two very important problems when we discuss conservation: ignorance and greed. The attitude of many can be summarized as follows, thanks to John Ruskin:

"Remember that the most beautiful things in the world are the most useless; Peacocks and Lilies for instance".

There is nothing in nature to prove that it cares more for our human species than for flies. We may one day vanish as quickly and radically as thousands of species before us. Whatever we have in common with other living things, there is one characteristic that is our exclusive genius; we are the only species working deliberately towards our own destruction.

The greatest threat to the environment and its varied biota is ignorance. We are often blind to what may be happening on our own doorstep. Over-exploitation, short-term benefit, introduction of exotics and pollution, to name but a few. The fight to save our threatened environment and its biota cannot be won by the professional elite alone, as they can accomplish very little without Government and popular support.

We have to avoid emotionalism and paternalism, and we must not play political marbles, unless of course one is on first name terms with one's local member of parliament or provincial counsellor. Although, inevitably, politicians will become involved in most conservation and/or environmental issues it is important to try and prevent them becoming political issues although I realise the difficulty in avoiding this. We must remember that politics may not move mountains, but it is remarkably effective at moving politicians.

Many conservation causes are lost, or lose their impact, because of emotional outbursts by an ill-informed minority. Wilderness, wildlife and our natural environment depend for their continued existence on the direction of mankind's cultural development. The quality of life is dependent on the whims of the biosphere, and as part of that biosphere the quantity and quality of man. The longer and better mankind lives, the worse off will the biosphere be. This of course depends on one's definition of better.

Here we come to the pivotal problem, overpopulation resulting from a virtually unchecked birthrate in Africa, as well as elsewhere on our globe. Of course we could blame this on the moon, as does Christopher Fry in *The Lady's not for burning*.

"The moon is nothing
But a circumambulatory aphrodisiac
Divinely subsidized to provoke the world
Into a rising birth rate".

In this country we have to deal with two distinct cultural lineages, one with its roots in Africa and the other with its roots in Europe. Because of these differences it is necessary to view conservation education programme in this light. The same principle would apply if one were drawing up conservation education programmes for say the Japanese and Brazilians, their cultural backgrounds would demand different approaches to be taken in both cases.

The white child with a full belly and adequate shelter can usually be persuaded not to chop down trees, he does not need them as a resource; not to hunt small mammals and birds, he does not need them to supplement his diet. The average rural black child with empty belly and often inadequate shelter uses wood, often the sole source of fuel, he needs to hunt otherwise there is little protein intake. In addition, if one rarely has a full stomach one would normally not have the will or inclination to worry about litter or pollution. Faced with a survival situation would you?

Conservation for conservation's sake is little more than a dream in this day and age, and conservation as we know it and expect it can only survive if it is for the people. Put bluntly there has to be utilisation and frequently a price tag attached. This can only be applied successfully if there is an awareness of the benefits of conservation in people's everyday lives.

The more time that passes, the more difficult it will become to solve environmental problems, and our current attempts at nature and environmental conservation education leave me with little optimism for the future. I strongly believe in conservation with and for the people or conservation of the environment will have a finite future.

Time "Like the dew on the mountains,
Like the foam on the rivier,
Like the bubble on the fountain,
Thou art gone, and for ever".

A piece of Walter Scott's wisdom.

Nature Conservation Departments in this country have neither the resources, manpower and in some instances seemingly the inclination required to assert the kind of positive influence that is needed in conservation education. I believe that no department employs an education officer with a formal training in conservation education and teaching, certainly no university or college in South Africa offers a course of this kind. The museum guide or museum education officer in the natural history museum has no formal training in conservation orientated education. Several may have training in the biological sciences but this does not qualify the person for conservation teaching.

We are then left with the private organisations, such as the Wildlife Society and Endangered Wildlife Trust, who, no doubt, try their best but

they are preaching largely to the converted and barely cause a ripple amongst the men in the street and none at all with the rural dweller.

The old cowboy saying about the wind strength can be applied to conservation education,

"Hang a logchain on a post. If the wind raises the Chain straight and from the post it's a calm day. But when the end links start snapping off, expect Rough weather".

Pressure on our fauna, flora and environment is already at the point where the end links have long ago started to snap off and we are looking at a much shorter chain, with the wind strength increasing. We are not coming to grips with the conservation education problems, resulting in large part from our overall, restrictive, education system. Most children given a forty-five minute talk at the museum, see this as a welcome reprieve from the familiar classroom. The follow up is limited, or non-existent.

The ideal is to get the child into the field, but here of course I recognise the massive logistical problems involved. But one does not have to move far out of town to illustrate the points you wish to make. Only a small part of conservation education should, and I emphasise should, involve big game. *Let them see and not just look at the rape of the land, the pollution and degradation and help them to understand the consequences not just to others, but to the children themselves. Involve the children, do not preach to them. It is only in this way that they will learn and understand. Of course one must always show them the pleasant things, and they are many, but the teacher must not lose the overall impact and opportunities by looking at the good things in isolation.*

There is a great deal of apathy amongst teachers and other educators dealing with the biological sciences and conservation. If we wish to guide or teach our children with local literature, we encounter a great void of locally produced material. We have the knowledge but we obviously do not appear to have the necessary interest or motivation. Once again, the restrictive, and largely inflexible, education system must shoulder a large percentage of the blame.

The highly motivated and enthusiastic teachers *DO* exist but in small numbers. They rarely last long within the confines of a "cram" syllabus and "by the book" inspectors and bureaucrats. There is little room for initiative and flexibility.

I have tended towards the pessimistic in order to stress the serious situation in which we find ourselves. If anyone reading this article considers that we have made or are making meaningful progress in conservation education in this country I would welcome hearing about it, but I would say that they have either been wearing blinkers or are not familiar with the seriousness of the situation.

An article of this nature would be useless if it were not terminated with some meaningful (in my opinion, that is) suggestions and recommendations.

The following are my principal proposals:

1. That a national working group be formed to deal, urgently, with a ground plan for the future of conservation education. All bodies involved

in this type of education should be represented by competent persons. The difficulty of course with most committees is that they often get bogged down with minor issues of procedure. This should not be allowed to happen. The matter is urgent and the need for action is now, not in two years or five years time.

2. Nature conservation and environmental study should become a compulsory subject from primary into senior school. Teachers of the biological sciences must be given extensive training in teaching this subject.

3. There is a desperate need for locally-produced literature using local material and examples. We can no longer use North American or European material; our children are not familiar with these. The text books used for teaching biology in South Africa are, in my opinion, appalling and guaranteed to put the pupil off the biological sciences. We are dealing with what should be an exciting, albeit at times depressing, ever-changing subject, with the type of literature available we are doing the child a disservice. Publishers and authors must be approached with a view to producing material of a high standard that stimulates and retains the child's interest.

4. A far greater allocation of funds will have to be granted by central and provincial governments for conservation and environmental education. The miniscule amount now available allows for little if any growth, development or hope. It is at present no more than a token gesture.

5. I think we should look more closely at the education programmes run by such organisations as Unesco, IUCN and the World Wildlife Fund. They are also tied by low funding but they have attained a relatively high level of expertise from which we could benefit. We should not be ashamed to look beyond our borders and accept that we are, in part, a Third World country.

We must not, however, only look at the financial aspects, we can have hundreds of millions of rands made available to us, but without a large body of well-paid, well-trained and dedicated teachers we would be no better off than we are now. Firstly then, as part of an ongoing programme we need to educate the educators and the politicians, in addition to our children.

Time is running out so rapidly that we cannot afford to delay much longer, as the wind increases its strength, so more links snap off the chain, and the chain shortens.

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