

Two Hats

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It would appear that environmental educators have a bad case of the "two hat" problem. We have come by the problem naturally and, therefore, we have paid little attention to it

The problem is simply that industry, utilities, labor, business, media and other segments of the population and the general public have consistently recognized only one hat when talking about environmentalists and environmental educators. It is not uncommon for dedicated environmental educators to be summarily dismissed as troublemakers - environmentalists. This one hat view is easily explained because environmental educators are almost always environmentalists. Perhaps definitions will help clarify the problem.

Any world citizen who advocates with greater or lesser action that wrongs against our environment must be stopped is an environmentalist. Perhaps the negative reputation environmentalists have stems from the dramatic and radical actions of a few.

An environmental educator, on the other hand, is any world citizen who uses information and educational processes to help people analyze the merits of the many and varied points of view usually present on a given environmental issue. The environmental educator is not the "mediator," "trade-off specialist" or "negotiator," but a developer of skills and an information analyst who prepares the people (from any segment of the population) who will participate in environmental decision making.

Environmental educators, therefore, need to be as "value fair" or "value free" as they can when working in this role. They must scrupulously strive to get all the facts, examine and illuminate all the viewpoints, and keep from letting their own particular position (as an environmentalist) from mixing with their educator role.

My suggestion is simply that environmental educators make an effort to clarify the two distinct roles. At every opportunity, we should emphasize the neutral nature of environmental education activity. Strong advocates are all around us, each using the techniques of persuasion and propaganda to build their constituencies. We must, ourselves, be familiar with all sides, stand firm for each advocate's right to be heard, and provide a rational stage for informed debate.

Environmental educators have the right and the duty to be environmentalists, but the dual roles must adhere to the original premise - to keep each hat on its proper head, while utilizing to the fullest the professional skills of the environmental educators.

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Originally in Aldrich, James L., Blackburn, A-M., & George, A. A. (Eds.) (1977). *The Report of the North American Regional Seminar on Environmental Education for the Red World*. Columbus, OH: SMEAC Information Reference Center.