

Environmental Education

Should Action Be A Goal? Yes

By Richard Wilke

Responsible and informed action has been a goal of environmental education since the first definitions of this field emerged nearly thirty years ago. More recent definitions continue to emphasize the central role of responsible action.

The 1996 *Report Assessing Environmental Education in the United States* prepared for Congress by the National Environmental Education Advisory Council defines environmental education as:

a learning process that increases people's knowledge and awareness about the environment and associated challenges, develops the necessary skills and expertise to address these challenges, and fosters attitudes, motivations, and commitments to make informed decisions and take responsible action. (p. 1)

An emphasis on personal and social decision making is not unique to environmental education. The *National Science Education Standards* published in 1996 by the National Research Council include four goals for science education, two of which pertain to this discussion. Students should be able to:

1. use appropriate scientific processes and principles in making personal decisions
2. engage intelligently in public discourse and debate about matters of scientific and technological concern. (p. 13)

Thus, personal and social decision making are seen as ultimate goals of environmental education and science education as well as several other fields of education.

Critics of the role of citizenship action in environmental education often claim that environmental educators are "activists [who] indoctrinate children, who in turn 'educate' their parents and the public" (Grigg, p. 45). Admittedly, there are examples of teachers who practice advocacy rather than education. Fortunately, they are the exception rather than the rule.

There is a proper place for citizen action in the environmental education curriculum. The sequence of instruction should end with citizen action and it should be an option, not a requirement. The *Environmental Education Guidelines for Excellence: What School-Age Learners Should Know and Be Able to Do*, prepared by the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) is organized around four themes. The themes are:

1. Knowledge of environmental processes and systems
2. Inquiry skills
3. Skills for decision and action
4. Personal and civic responsibility

In describing the fourth theme, the guidelines state:

Environmental literacy goes beyond possessing knowledge and skills, since even well honed skills for taking action cannot have an effect unless they are used. During the years

of their formal education, learners develop the inclination to put their knowledge and skills to work, acting on their own conclusions about what should be done to ensure environmental quality.

Environmental education aims to foster in learners a sense of their own efficacy--a confidence that they have the ability to inquire, learn, analyze, decide, communicate and participate. Through the learning process, students become independent and responsible thinkers and actors. Students learn that they control their own success or failure, and they grow in the knowledge that their actions can make a difference.

Environmentally literate persons possess a strong sense of citizenship. They understand the role of citizens in a democracy, and accept their part with responsibility and commitment. During their school years, learners grow into the role of citizen, developing the personal and civic insight and traits that motivate action. Cultivating their own environmental and social ethic helps learners make difficult decisions and accept personal responsibility for those choices. (p. 14-15)

State guidelines for curriculum planning in environmental education commonly address how citizen action should be incorporated in the curriculum. Wisconsin's curriculum model for environmental education, which is typical of others, emphasizes "perceptual awareness" and "knowledge" as prerequisites for instruction on citizen action. Citizen action is the focus near the end of the K-12 curriculum, not at the beginning (p. 76). Research results from a random sample of over 3,500 Wisconsin students (Champeau, p. 6) indicate that "students believe environmental problems can be prevented and solved and feel they have a personal responsibility to help prevent and solve environmental problems." There are good examples of environmental education curriculum materials that develop students' investigation, evaluation and action skills. Perhaps the best is *Investigating and Evaluating Environmental Issues and Actions* (Hungerford et al.). It has received awards from the National Science Teachers Association and it was selected by the U.S. Department of Education for dissemination through the National Diffusion Network. One component of this program, entitled "Action Analysis Criteria," includes fourteen questions that should be asked before anyone proceeds with an environmental action.

1. Is there *sufficient evidence* to warrant action on this issue?
2. Are there *alternative actions* available for use? What are they?
3. Is the action chosen the most *effective* one available?
4. Are there *legal consequences* of this action? If so, what are they?
5. Will there be *social consequences* of this action? If so, what are they?
6. Will there be *economic consequences* of this action? If so, what are they?
7. What are the *ecological consequences* of this action?
8. Do my *personal values* support this action?
9. Do I understand the *beliefs and values of others* who are involved in this issue?
10. Do I understand the *procedures* necessary to take this action?
11. Do I have the *skills* needed to complete this action?
12. Do I have the *courage* to take this action?
13. Do I have the *time* needed to complete this action?
14. Do I have all the *other resources* (other than the above) needed to make this action effective?

Students who become involved in citizen action after addressing these fourteen questions are practicing environmental education action, not environmental advocacy.

In conclusion, there is a need for instruction in environmental education action in the K-12 classroom. The instruction should come from teachers trained in environmental education. In contrast, teachers who promote their own perspective and define the course of action for their students do an injustice both to their students and to the field of environmental education.

References

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