

1. Conference strand

Sustainability

2. Title and Presenter

A new vision for charting the future

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3. Abstract

Environmental education over the last 34 years has made some good ‘baby steps’ to generating an environmental mindset in the population and continues to do so. Research shows that environmentally positive attitudes have become a norm in our country, yet responsible environmental behaviors are still not the norm. Many people espouse an environment worldview but are also in conflict between what they would like to see and what they think they will have to give up.

A major problem is how a majority of people perceive the future will look, and it is usually negative, either as a world gone awry with environmental devastation or as a enforced world of severely imposed restrictions. Discussion here emphasizes that a positive vision of the future would highlight a different way of thinking, which could in turn change our way of educating to achieve an inherently sustainable lifestyle now.

4. Paper

When asked the question: How do you feel the environment of this planet will look in 25 years from now, or 100 years from now? There are four general responses:

1. No real change over 25 years (or even 100 years?) with it only slightly (or more) worse than today
2. Technology will save the day – has so far – a science fiction kind of future
3. A dark despondent future of environmental catastrophes with environmental devastation being prominent.
4. A vague but hopeful sustainable future where change is forced on the human race because of environmental disasters rather than voluntary change. A few people do have hope for a voluntary shift to sustainability.

In general the results for these four scenarios of the future are 8%, 16%, 68%, and 8% respectively, which means that number three (coupled with four) is by far the most prominent mind-frame for the future expectations of many people. The rest put their hope in a dreamlike technology or don't even consider there even is a problem with environmental degradation (Richard Jurin & Lynne Fox-Parrish, unpublished data)

What are we trying to do in environmental education? We can agree, it is to create change for sustaining the environment. It might also be agreed that environmental education, since 1970, has come a long way in making people aware of environmental degradation. But if people have a predominantly negative view of the future it can hinder any desire to make that change, because a dark, depressing future may be what we are convinced will exist.

This negativity seems to pervade the whole environmental field. Take a random selection of modern environmental book titles for instance: Earth in the balance; 50 ways to save the earth; State of the world; Saving the earth; Environmental problems in the third world cities;

Environmental Problems in an Urbanizing World: Finding Solutions in Africa, Asia and Latin America; 101 Solved Environmental Engineering Problems; Renewable Natural Resources and the Environment: Pressing Problems in the Developing World; The World's Wasted Wealth 2: Save Our Wealth, Save Our Environment and; From Apocalypse to Way of Life, just to name a few from a simple web browser selection. Is there a hidden message here? - Do it or else! It would seem that we are preaching a doom and gloom scenario, and the majority of people seem not to be responding to the idea that we can make a difference. Perhaps our problem is that our listeners may think, "make hay today while the sun shines, for tomorrow is a terrible place."

Some new research shows a great many people are symbolic environmentalists. This means that they espouse beliefs that support improving the environment but don't really do much, if any, action that supports these beliefs (Jurin & Fortner 2000) When we look at specific worldviews about the environment, we also find that there is a large group that are "moderate environmentalists." Over 60% of people studied, placed themselves in a moderate position of supporting the environment (e.g. preservation minded or supporters of Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic idea) but unwilling to give up their modern lifestyle. Some 10% claimed they were hard environmentalists (Jurin & Hutchinson in press). Taken together, we could have over 70% of people willing to actively support environmental action. Yet, what is presenting them from being truly environmental in their actions?

When Columbus found the New World his "old" worldview refused to let him believe he wasn't near China. Magellan was able to transcend his worldview so that he could challenge conventional doctrine and accept that sailing around the Cape Horn would lead to discovery of an "unknown world." People today may be thinking only of the environment as part of their world within the confines of their experience of modern living. We need to get them to break out of their experience and see things differently – paint a different picture of the future for them to look at – one that emphasizes a positive sustainable future.

Quinn (1999) states that "If the world is to be saved, it will not be by old minds with new programs, but new minds with no programs at all." Programs are sticks planted in the mud to impede the flow of the river. But they can't stop the flow. "Programs never stop the things they're launched to stop" (p.8) He goes on to emphasize that what works to eliminate the need for programs is a 'vision,' for when a vision works well, the forces that drive it are invisible! (p.11)

What would a vision for an ecological renaissance look like? Certainly not like we know it now? After all, what might the medieval renaissance have looked like to Leonardi Da Vinci? It is hard to imagine a paradigm different from the one you are already living. What we may need to emphasize in our field is that sustainability is not a half-life of voluntary poverty and penance for our current environmental sins! We can't all be environmental saints tomorrow, and we don't need to be. Nature is where we are all the time – it's not about going 'back to nature,' or poverty, or anything like that – just something better. It isn't modern living that is the problem, just how we are living it (Quinn, 1999, p.90).

In the modern battle of David versus Goliath (environmentalism versus consumerism) we don't need to defeat Goliath, just change the way he thinks. For example, Ray C. Anderson of Interface, Inc. saw that being in regulatory compliance was not enough. In his company he ended the dependence on petroleum products and now makes 100% recyclable carpet from 100% recyclable materials with almost no waste (Quinn, 1999, p100-101). He merely thought differently and with transformational leadership.

If the world is to be saved it will be by people with a New Vision that inspires them. Buckminster Fuller once said, “You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the old model obsolete.” Can we have some details please?? “When the plane is going down and someone offers you a parachute, you don’t demand to see the warranty” (Quinn, 1999, p173).

We need to paint a new picture (vision) of the future. A simple future vision now being used by the Environmental Studies Program at the University of Northern Colorado is ‘To evoke a positive and sustainable depiction of the future that is attainable now.’ Note the present tense. Sustainability has all that you want from this old consumerist paradigm we persist in hanging onto, but the future will be ecologically sustainable – so we just need you to think differently about how you do things. Focus on Sustainable Development Education. We have it all now; just need you to make the effort and think differently.

A New Story to be in – a positive and sustainable future that has all the comforts of modern living. Old Minds: How do we solve the problems? New Minds: How do we make happen what we want to happen?

Living sustainably can be equated to a successful diet, which is usually based on a life style change. In such a diet, it is important that the dieter not be hungry and that they follow a new way of eating for the rest of their lives. Of course there are the temptations of sweet and fatty foods, but when the dieter sees the positive effects of weight loss and increased vigor and energy, satisfaction is ensured. It takes change to lose weight and keep it off, and sustainable living is no different, but the benefits of sustainable living are their own reward.

Part of the problem of attaining a sustainable paradigm seems to be an illusion that it must all happen at once and be the solution. If we educate that it won’t occur at once, but begin and evolve and with continuous improvements in sustainable technology, it would be more appealing. A vision will also mean that it involves collective thinking. This of course implies bottom up change, yet as Ray Anderson showed, transformational leaders can, and do, work well with the collective vision. Sustainability isn’t a focused end goal, but a mindset that will proceed despite no set plan. Once begun, it will be an obvious direction to live. Many communities, such as Chattanooga, TN, and Curitiba, Brazil, have become new eco-cities with a higher quality of life through sustainable planning that was not predicated on an environmental paradigm. Indeed, the real cost benefit of sustainable living, as many businesses have shown, is an economic incentive. Sustainable living increases the quality of life and reduces the consumerist mentality. Once the benefits and logic of sustainable living are realized, much of our work in the field will be easier.

Old Minds think: How do we stop these bad things from happening? - If it didn’t work last year, let’s throw more money at it and make more laws. New Minds think: How do we make things the way we want them to be? If it didn’t work last year, let’s do something else this year

Conclusion

A large majority of people who espouse values for environmentalism have a negative vision of the future. This might be a critical barrier that is preventing positive actions towards sustainable living. If we, as environmental educators, can foster a positive vision of a sustainable future that is attainable now, it is possible that the change we desire may proceed more easily. Is this an idealistic dream? Some might argue so, but given hope for a positive future in which one is

asked merely to adopt different practices with positive outcomes is not a bad option to try. If change is unknown and scary, we might think of the words by Guillaume Atollinaire:

Come to the edge.
We can't, we're afraid.
Come to the edge.
We can't, we'll fall.
Come to the edge.
And they came.
He pushed them and they flew.

Reference list

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