

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

OVERVIEW

Shortly after Earth Day in 1997, a parent wrote a letter to the *New York Times*: “I have noticed a disturbing trend. With each passing school year, my children are more convinced that humans and technology are bad for the planet ... While teachers are helping to insure a ‘greener’ future, I do not think they understand that children may infer a condemnation of humanity.”¹ The following year, the Sierra Club took a group of fourth graders on a field trip to downtown Denver. After encouraging the children to use sidewalk chalk to draw pictures of endangered animals, Sierra Club organizers gathered the children around a podium and began denouncing the voting record of a Colorado senator.

Textbooks commonly warn of alleged pending environmental catastrophes, while any evidence to the contrary is largely absent. Consider the few excerpts below taken from some textbooks:

- Global warming will cause polar ice caps to melt, says one junior high school text. New York City would almost be covered with water. Only the tops of very tall buildings will be above the water. But most scientists believe that if the world gets warmer, the sea level might increase only by six to 40 inches.²
- *Rainforest*, a storybook for small children, tells how a man on a bulldozer destroys the rainforest and its animal life. Justice is done when the rain comes and washes the bulldozer over a cliff, killing the man. (A drawing shows the man falling to his death.) “The Machine was washed away!” the book concludes. “But the creatures of the rainforest were safe.”³
- An environmental supplement to the *Weekly Reader* states that CFCs (chlorofluorocarbons) “break down and go directly to the ozone layer and destroy it.” These CFCs “are found in the plastic foam from which cups, plates, and some fast food containers are made.”⁴ But by 1992, when this issue appeared, plastic foam products had been CFC-free for two years.

Textbooks often have a bias against market economies:

- One book notes: “The main reason [that there are so many starving people], however, is that food is traded as a commodity whose price is driven by economic factors. Once money enters

¹ M. A. Maxwell, “Save the Planet, But Don’t Forget Humans,” *New York Times*, 24 April 1997.

² J. J. Houghton et al., ed., *Climate Change 1995: The Science of Climate Change* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

³ Helen Cowcher, *Rainforest* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1998).

⁴ Bonnie Ferraro and Karen Brumley, *Saving Our Planet* (Columbus, Ohio: American Education Publishing, Weekly Reader 1992), 5.



the picture of food supply and distribution, the goal of turning a profit and maintaining a healthy economy can override the goal of feeding the hungry people of the world.”⁵

Textbooks even urge activism, telling students directly what position they should take:

- “Take Action,” says one textbook. “Organize an event to raise public awareness about the destruction of tropical rainforests — a school assembly for example. Write to Rainforest Action Network (RAN), an international organization that works to preserve rainforests. Ask them for suggestions about organizing your event.”⁶

Despite all the hype in textbooks and other environmental education vehicles, most of the fear about environmental catastrophes is unfounded. By most measures, the environment in North America has improved substantially, as noted in the following:

- Air quality has dramatically improved in the last few decades. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, national emissions of carbon monoxide declined by 14.8 percent between 1975 and 1994, and emissions of sulfur dioxide declined by 24.6 percent during the same period. These declines occurred in spite of substantial economic growth.
- The United States has more standing timber now than it did in 1920, and more timber grows each year than is cut.

But children rarely hear this view. As a result, rather than learning the basics about biology, they are living in fear of environmental disaster.

- “Our Earth is getting hotter every minute and the only way we can stop it is to stop burning Styrofoam,” wrote Catherine Mitchell, then a student at Percy Priest Elementary School in Nashville, Tennessee. “I’m also too young to die, might I add, so stop burning the Earth!”⁷ Catherine worried about dying because she had learned that global warming and a thinning ozone layer threaten her life. Never mind that the greenhouse effect and the so-called hole in the ozone layer have little to do with each other, or that burning Styrofoam has little to do with either one. Catherine’s environmental knowledge was scientifically weak but emotionally potent.

In addition, environmental educators — largely following the lead of activist groups that offer their materials and time — spend a good deal of time teaching children how to lobby lawmakers. Such activities often don’t take the form of a civics lesson in which children learn about the process or even choose their point of view. Instead, children are told how to lobby and what is the appropriate point of view. In 1994, the *Arizona Daily Star* ran a series of letters by children regarding the building of a housing development near the children’s school. The letters indicated that the children were taught one message: The housing development was going to destroy all wildlife because greedy people wanted to build homes they allegedly didn’t need. Given the consistency of the message, it’s worth highlighting a number of the children’s comments:⁸

- “My class and I were ready to protest and try to tell them to stop bulldozing down all our trees. But we decided to not protest because the person who owns the land probably won’t listen to us — he or she is too motivated by money.”

⁵ Bernstein, Winkler, and Zierdt-Warshaw, *Environmental Science: Ecology and Human Impact* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1995), 220.

⁶ Robert E. Snyder et al., *Earth Science: The Challenge of Discovery* (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1991), 65.

⁷ Illustrated Newsletter of Kids FACE, Nashville, Tenn., *Kids FACE* (March/April 1991), 3.

⁸ “Damaging the Desert,” *Arizona Daily Star*, 31 July 1994, 6.



- “People are so greedy about money. I can’t understand what makes them like that. Every day a house gets built. And every day an animal has to move to a different home.”
- “My class and I came to watch today ... We looked at the nature and thought about how we could stop the building.”
- “What about my grandchildren? And their grandchildren won’t get to look at the desert because it won’t be there.”
- “I am afraid that we will use up more land than we give back. We have very little water left ... Arizona is getting bigger and uglier.”

Education, Not Fear

How can parents and teachers give students a balanced view of environmental problems? One way is to expand the information they receive. To that end, the Competitive Enterprise Institute is distributing *Facts, Not Fear*, a book that contains the facts that are not covered in textbooks and the scientific controversies that are not explained. Simply learning that reputable scientists often disagree with the claims of imminent catastrophe will keep children from blindly fearing the future. Such information also will help them see that environmental science is a discipline that reflects scientific uncertainty and is open to continual discovery. Students can learn about environmental issues and develop their critical thinking skills at the same time. As scientists do, they can collect the facts and see whether the theories that have been advanced actually fit the facts.

— *This section is adapted in part from Facts, Not Fear: Teaching Children about the Environment (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 1999), by Michael Sanera and Jane S. Shaw.*



FEDERAL ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

Former Sen. Gaylord Nelson, the environmental activist who started “Earth Day,” authored the first Environmental Education Act of 1970, which created the Office of Environmental Education in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Although touted by supporters as simply training in the appreciation of nature and science, federal environmental education has used taxpayer funds to promote the agenda of those administering the programs. If members of Congress want to ensure that the government does not fund advocacy and miseducation, their best option is to eliminate funding of these programs. A review of how the law has worked in the past may help demonstrate this reality.

Legislative History

Whether the federal government should fund environmental education has remained a question since the law’s inception. In 1981, the Reagan administration eliminated the office, but Congress restored it in 1990 within the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The law expired in 1996. Congress continues to provide funds for the EPA program even though controversy prevents reauthorization of the law. In 2001, Sens. James Inhofe (R-Okla.) and Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) introduced a bill (S. 876) to reauthorize the Environmental Education Act.

In 1990, the Environmental Education Act created the EPA Office of Environmental Education, which provides educational materials, seminars, and other programs. The office also administers environmental education grants and environmental awards programs.

Educational Partnerships

Perhaps the most egregious aspect of the law is its funding of outside groups whose main goal is advocacy. For example, the law created the Environmental Education Training and Partnership (EETAP).¹ Under this provision, EPA funds a group of organizations that are supposed to provide support and training to environmental professionals. EETAP members produce educational guides for professors, hold conferences, and provide training. EPA awarded \$9 million to the North American Association of Environmental Education (NAAEE) to serve as the EETAP leader from 1995 to 2000. The University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point is now the designated leader and is slated to receive more than \$5 million over the next several years, according to EPA.² There are clear indicators that these groups have violated the federal government’s prohibition on using federal funds for lobbying activities. Consider two examples:

- The National American Association for Environmental Education, EETAP’s lead partner for 1995-2000, produced an “action handbook,” which it distributes at federally funded environmental education seminars. It’s basically a how-to guide for lobbying and includes a section titled “Ten Pointers for Successful Lobbying.”³
- In 1994, EPA funded a video that the agency admitted had violated regulations against using such funds for lobbying. When Rep. Bob Schaeffer (R-Colo.) inquired about the video’s content last

¹ See <http://www.eetap.org>.

² Environmental Protection Agency, *Educator Training: The Environmental Education and Training Partnership* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. EPA, February 2001), <http://www.epa.gov/ocepa111/NNEMS/pdf/EducatorTrainingforweb.pdf>.

³ *Promoting Environmental Education: An Action Handbook for Strengthening EE in Your State and Community* (Rock Spring, Ga.: NAAEE, 1994). This book also is listed as a resource on at least one EPA Web page. See <http://www.epa.gov/reg50opa/enved/geneelibrary.html>.



October, the agency said that it had asked its partner to return the federal funding and to stop distributing the video because of obvious violations. It is not clear whether the agency pulled the video before or after the Schaeffer letter.⁴

EPA Educational Materials

Educational materials available on EPA's Web sites also are telling. On the headquarters page, the materials under the "Kids" link range from superficial information to misinformation to shameless self-promotion. One section includes a story titled "When Greenville Turned Brown," which tells the tale of a town that was saved by the federal Superfund law and EPA from the "old Drumleaky factory." So the story goes:

- "From factory smoke stacks came clouds gray and black, and drums filled with old gloppy glue were piled high out back. Not far away was a creek lined with trees, the fish that had lived there were now forced to flee. ... The EPA experts were soon on the scene, with shovels and drills they were ready to clean. ... The EPA experts soon came up with a plan. To clean up the water, the air, and the land. ... The factory reopened, with new rules in place, for preventing pollution and cleaning up waste."⁵

Grants

In addition, the law provides funds throughout the nation to numerous groups for various environmental activities. Some grants may provide good educational opportunities, but it is very difficult, if not impossible, to monitor and ensure that all or at least a majority provide sound educational experiences. Brief descriptions from EPA Web pages and press releases indicate that the agency is using grants to advance political and social agendas. As a regional administrator noted in a press release, "groups that are receiving these grants ... are working to build attitudes, lifestyles, and critical thinking skills."⁶ The lifestyles promoted are anticonsumption and antichemical use, and the attitudes focus on regulatory solutions and political organizing. Note the following examples:

- One grant funds seminars on "regulations for recreational vehicle usage."⁷
- Another teaches children about "non-polluting alternatives to pesticides and herbicides."⁸
- A grant for \$69,000 went to an EPA-created activist organizer in Rhode Island.⁹
- Another program promotes "renewable fuels," assuming they are always better.¹⁰

⁴ John Kasper, Acting Deputy Associate Administrator, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Communications, Education and Media Relations, Letter to the Honorable Bob Schaeffer, 12 August 2000 (stamped date).

⁵ <http://www.epa.gov/kids/greenvil.htm>.

⁶ "New York Groups Get \$80,000 in EPA Education Grants," EPA Region 2 Press Release, <http://www.epa.gov/region02/epd/00142.htm>.

⁷ "EPA Awards \$2.1 Million for Environmental Education Projects," <http://www.epa.gov/region01/pr/files/pr1029c.html>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ "EPA Pledges More Than \$150,000 to Support Providence Environmental Projects," Region 1 Press Release, <http://www.epa.gov/region01/pr/files/pr061397a.html>.

¹⁰ "EPA Awards \$21,195 to Support Environmental Education in Ohio," PR Newswire, 20 June 2000.



- Numerous groups that receive federal environmental education grants include well-known activist groups such as the Sierra Club,¹¹ the American Lung Association,¹² and the Audubon Society.¹³ Funding such groups essentially means funding their agendas.

Problems With Proposed Reauthorization

Because of obvious controversies with the existing law, bill supporters contend that S. 876 would ensure more balanced and accurate environmental education programs. Yet proposed revisions do little to change the law.

One section calls on programs to be “objective and scientifically sound,” but such provisions can offer only a symbolic commitment to sound science. Another provision would mandate that the EPA Science Advisory Board review all guidelines for environmental education grants. However, with millions of dollars and hundreds of grants to review, this board would not be able to screen out the numerous misguided programs.

— Angela Logomasini

Key Experts

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Recommended Readings

Logomasini, Angela. “Inhofe-Clinton Environmental Miseducation Bill.” *CEI On Point*. Washington, D.C.: Competitive Enterprise Institute, 26 June 2001, <http://www.cei.org/OnPointReader.asp?ID=1528>.

Sanera, Michael and Jane Shaw. *Facts, Not Fear: Teaching Children about the Environment*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 1999.

Sanera, Michael. “The EPA’s Support for Biased and Politicized Environmental Education.” *CEI On Point*. Washington D.C.: Competitive Enterprise Institute, 26 June 2000.

¹¹ A quick search on EPA’s Web page finds that chapters of one of the most activist groups in the nation, the Sierra Club (www.sierraclub.org), have received federal funds on many occasions. The club has received grants for programs in Indiana (<http://www.epa.gov/reg50opa/enved/pastindiana.html>), Texas (<http://www.epa.gov/ocepa111/NNEMS/grants/texas.htm>), and Pennsylvania (<http://www.epa.gov/ocepa111/NNEMS/grants/penn.htm>).

¹² For example, see www.epa.gov/grants/va.htm, Virginia, 1998 Grants.

¹³ For example, the Massachusetts Audubon Society received \$60,000 in 1998, www.epa.gov/grants/ma.htm.

