

NOTES, NEWS & COMMENTS

South Chilterns Rural Studies Project

Background

It is sad and unfortunate that, nowadays, many village children have little understanding of, or love for, their surrounding countryside. Surely we should try to equip them with a basic knowledge and understanding of our natural environment, so that they can appreciate much of what the countryside has to offer. Present-day school pressures make it difficult to devote enough time or energy to this very worth-while objective. Consequently our aim in this Project is to give local primary schools, with the help of outside staff, the chance to produce a generation of children who can learn to observe and identify, and so to enjoy and respect, the countryside and all that goes on within it. It is a chance to create a new generation of real countrymen—and to demonstrate to others at least a prototype of what we hope and believe can be done.

Many primary-school teachers themselves have little experience of the country, and to take a class of thirty children on a Nature walk requires full attention also to safety and order. There is tremendous potential to develop the interest and understanding of children between the ages of 6 and 12 years, and to give them a broad knowledge of the natural history in their local environment, of farming, and of forestry.

In an attempt to increase people's knowledge and understanding of the natural world, many well-meaning conservation bodies have mounted expensive education projects which, broadly speaking, have fallen into two main categories:

- i) Producing printed study-packs for schools, with or without outside help.
- ii) Funding visitor study-centres, with or without expert personnel.

There is a low success-rate in these approaches. Why?

Reasons for Failure of the Traditional Approach

The reasons for the lack of success of this approach are many, of which the following stand out:

- a) Rural studies tend to be time-consuming and staff time is limited.
- b) Schools and teachers are already over-stretched, or at least fully extended.
- c) Many teachers, because of their own background, feel inadequate to deal with outdoor subjects, except on a very theoretical basis.
- d) Teachers who already feel inadequate, are often daunted by experts.
- e) Because of the many demands on a teacher's time, projects only succeed if he/she is particularly committed.
- f) The demands of a large class are such that a teacher only spends a short period of the day in close communication with an individual pupil.
- g) The attitudes and values of the family often have more bearing on a child than does his/her school.
- h) The family attitudes tend to be developed before the child attends school.
- i) Despite being exposed to excellent wildlife programmes on radio and television, the message

needs to be interpreted personally if it is to be fully absorbed.

Some of these problems are overcome by intensive periods spent in study centres—especially where these are of a residential nature. But, even here, the impact is rarely followed up by long-term projects—such as the study of local plants and animals throughout the seasons. Special 'media' programmes tend to diminish the local, familiar nature of the home environment for the child, by replacing what is familiar with a special, distant, and new environment. Such exposure to the exotic can be exciting to an extent that makes local, familiar things seem dull.

Positive Proposals

Children need to learn from shared experiences interpreted by someone with whom they can relate with trust, enthusiasm, and affection. This contact should be regular and frequent, relaxed and convivial, if the experiences and skills gained are to be developed into considered attitudes and appropriate action.

The personnel, who should be designated 'Country-side Education Assistants' (CEAs), would work alongside, and in a manner that is complementary to, the child's other important mentors, namely his or her teacher and parents. To make an effective and self-perpetuating impact, a concerted effort should be made over an area serving a few schools, with each CEA having a specific affiliation and taking about four classes per week, but working under a Team Environmental Coordinator (TEC).

Nature and Role of the CEAs

Ideally the Countryside Education Assistants should be people with a good all-round background in natural history and a child-like enthusiasm to explore and discover. They should be authoritative without being authoritarian, but need to be reliable, capable, and conscientious. They should be dedicated and really caring, able to listen and counsel rather impose and preach.

The main function of a CEA would be to:

- i) Liaise with the class teacher;
- ii) Act as group leader with children in and out of school;
- iii) Investigate and interpret the natural environment of the child's locality, and plan and lead visits, studies, and related activities;
- iv) Devise long-term projects and produce materials for them if necessary; and
- v) Encourage and support a child in the development of his or her particular interests, imbuing them with an aura of adventure.

Nature and Role of the TECs

- i) Ideally he/she should be familiar with the problems of the teaching situation and with the aims and objectives of the school.
- ii) He/she should be able to identify aims and objectives within the Project and to communicate these to the participants.
- iii) He/she should be able to liaise sympathetically with the school.

- iv) He/she should have a broad understanding of environmental processes and conservation, and therefore be able to draw on and develop the expertise of the team.

The function of the TEC should involve performing such duties as: helping to appoint the team, liaising with head teachers and their staff, coordinating the relationship between teacher and CEA, acting as consultant/adviser to the group, coordinating policy, communicating with and coordinating the local community, keeping abreast of topical issues and publications as well as local organizations etc., fund-raising (possibly!), and all the time training the team by developing skills, discussing ideas and problems, and encouraging initiative. An attitude of adventure should be encouraged throughout.

Finance

The plan is to set up a team of keen unemployed naturalists (teachers, graduates, and others) to work with the primary schools in the (human) catchment area of Langtree School (a comprehensive school at Woodcote, Oxfordshire, England). The scheme will be relying very heavily on the Manpower Services Commission (MSC), from whom we have obtained the support for six part-time places. A charitable Trust is, however, being established to cover administrative and supervisory expenses and to provide a cushion against any political or MSC changes, so that donations will always be welcome.

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Leaf from a Graduate Student's Paper: Our Message about The Biosphere Evidently Sinking In*

I never really thought about The Biosphere until Polunin addressed our class. Though I had heard of The Biosphere before, I had never thought about how it encompasses our very life. I told some of my friends that we were drawing up some proposals about The Biosphere and were possibly going to get them published in an internationally read environmental journal. They scoffed and asked how I could think that they could take us, a bunch of idealistic college students, seriously about something as important as The Biosphere. I did not answer, but thought to myself about that Ben Franklin quote which was on the board the other day: 'They man who does things may make mistakes, but he never makes the biggest mistake of doing nothing.'

I kept thinking that they can go on studying their economics, political science, and business law, but that they will have to make the decision of whether to act or not someday. Clearly, education will have to play a key role if we are to save The Biosphere. We must learn to get along with The Biosphere, for it is our environment, our air, and our life-blood. If we do not modernize and rethink

our environmental policies soon, it may become too late. Teaching the responsibilities and consequences of human occupancy of The Biosphere is analogous to teaching people about their own homes.

If you do not maintain the condition of your home—its physical plant and family—it will soon start to degrade. Once degradation has started, new policies must be implemented quickly to stop failure of the structure of the house and its inhabiting family. A house is not a home without people living in it, just as The Biosphere is nothing without [plenty of] that indefinable thing we call life. I thought that point five of our proposal was very good: Upholding The Biosphere as sacred, as life itself is sacred, will serve to help Mankind to save it.

*Kindly communicated by Professor Henryk Skolimowski, whose submission with his students on 'The Biosphere as Seen by Students from Ann Arbor, Michigan', was published late last year (*Environmental Conservation*, 10(4), p. 356, 1983).—Ed.

International Conservation Conventions: Are They Being Implemented?

The undersigned and Laura H. Kosloff are currently conducting investigations into the implementation of international conservation conventions. The 'implementation gap' is a well-recognized but inadequately studied phenomenon which seriously hampers conservation efforts. Information on whether, and if so how, international legal instruments for conservation are being implemented in individual countries has never, so far as we are aware, been collected or analyzed. The information or materials in which we are most interested includes:

- Copies or at least citations of any reports, memoranda, or papers, discussing the implementation of CITES, World Heritage, Ramsar, Western Hemisphere, *as well as other* international conventions and agreements dealing with habitats, species, or genetic resources. (This information can be general or specific with respect to a particular country.)
- Information on the specific national legislation implementing these conventions in individual countries, and on the legislation's strengths and weaknesses (in carrying out such implementation).

—Personal and organizational views on the implementation and effectiveness of particular conventions, their strengths and weaknesses, their particular advantages and drawbacks, and the politics of their adoption and implementation.

Any information which readers of *Environmental Conservation* may be able to provide will help us in understanding what is happening with the current body of international conventions, in what directions they can and should go in the future, and whether further conventions would be appropriate. Your cooperation would be greatly appreciated. Confidentiality can be maintained if desired. Please send any responses and pertinent information to the undersigned.

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