

Editorial: Education for a Sustainable Environment

The front cover of this issue of *New Era in Education* is an eighteenth century portrait of the extinct flightless bird, the dodo, so named from the Dutch “dodoor”, meaning “sluggard”, following its discovery by Admiral van Neck in 1598. Humans exploited the dodo because it was good to eat and they considered it to be a stupid bird that didn’t run away. But it was the humans who were stupid. Instead of farming the creature, they slaughtered every last one of them without a thought of preserving a stock for future use. What more fitting symbol could be found to illustrate the need for the principle of sustainability in the twenty-first century?

Ignorance of this sort is anathema to anyone concerned with the world-wide improvement and spread of education. *New Era in Education* has an honourable tradition of concern for environmental education, as the extract from volume 56 (1975) in our new column, “The Last Word” (p.32) testifies. The articles in the current issue are all concerned with developing education for a sustainable environment, focussing on projects at a realistic level.

The difficulties in adapting educational activities to embrace sustainability are addressed by Lesley Le Grange in his article on Science and Sustainability. He analyses how far science and environmental education programmes can incorporate sustainability, in particular in South Africa’s new Curriculum 2005.

John Meadows takes up the theme, raising questions of comparative perspectives in developing countries before showing how, even within the bounds of a restrictive national curriculum like that of the UK, room can be made to attain the aims of sustainability.

The very different perspective of rural communities’ needs are addressed by Callie Loubser, who analyses the indicators for sustainability in community life. He goes on to look at both context and practice in two attempts to incorporate sustainable ends into projects in rural South African communities at Mthethomusha and Vanwyksdorp.

A partnership between industry and local communities may raise eyebrows among those who see capitalist economic structures as the principal cause of the environmental destruction facing humankind. But an example of a successful partnership is described by Corrie van der Linde and Buzz Bezuidenhout, who make a convincing argument for the potentialities of such developments.

Back in the classroom, Peter Bloomfield looks at a simple but effective way in which children in developed countries such as the UK can be taught concern for the environment and the basics of sustainability through studying the sources of the food they eat, and working on a school allotment to grow their own food.

In the final article, Ulrich Gebhard takes a lateral thinking approach. He suggests a way to turn the unthinking anthropocentrism which has led to ruthless exploitation of the environment, with no thought for sustainability, into empathetic awareness. Instead of trying to ‘correct’ children’s natural anthropomorphic tendencies, they can be harnessed toward understanding the needs of the environment.

We are up against powerful forces of self-interest and greed, as the recent dot.com bubble all too clearly demonstrates. An entertaining but salutary account of that debacle, by John Cassidy, is reviewed by Dennis Adams on page 26.

The World Education Fellowship was founded to encourage parents and teachers to enable children to think for themselves, as Arthur Sandell’s fascinating reminiscence in the Forum reminds us. It is only by the efforts of imaginative educators and projects involving experience of the real world, such as the articles in this issue of *New Era in Education* address, that the concept of sustainability has any chance of reaching the minds of the children who will face the consequences of environmental decisions in the future.

Recent newspapers (e.g. *Guardian*, 1 March 2002) have reported that scientists have obtained DNA from the remains, housed in Oxford University’s Museum of Natural History, of the stuffed dodo which was burned in 1795 by the curators of the Ashmolean museum. It was suggested that the idea had been considered of using the DNA to attempt to reintroduce the dodo by means of *Jurassic Park* style cloning technology. But the dream was foolish. There was insufficient usable DNA in the poor specimen’s remains. All the wonders of contemporary science cannot undo the damage that has already been done to the environment. Unless sustainability becomes a principle taught to our children across the globe, human civilisation may itself one day become, to use the old English colloquial idiom, as dead as the dodo.

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