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**Reorienting Environmental Education for Environmental Justice  
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# Reorienting Environmental Education for Environmental Justice

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## Abstract

In this paper, we highlight the potential role of environmental education at all levels, to contribute to personal and community capacity building for environmental justice. We argue that the failure of the environmental education movement to address issues of environmental justice and to *systematically* address the lack of diversity in the field is a critical issue. We also argue that environmental content and pedagogies which don't reflect multiple cultural perspectives, reinforce limited concepts of 'the environment' and environmental protection, and circumscribe and legitimate a limited environmental discourse will not produce empowered and informed students, graduates and environmental leaders. We also highlight the potential that 'education for sustainability' shows, coming as it does, from a broader conception of society than 'traditional' environmental education. Finally, we list a range of community, secondary, elementary, non-profit and academic courses and clinical programs which can be regarded as examples of innovation and best practice.

## 1991: Environmental Education at the Emergence of the National Environmental Justice Movement

In October of 1991 the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit brought together over 300 delegates from communities around the United States and the world. This convocation launched the Environmental Justice Movement onto the (inter)national stage. Marked by a direct challenge to the mainstream or traditional environmental movement and the discredited environmental regulatory apparatus (Lavelle and Coyle 1992, Bullard 1999), it highlighted the political organizing work of communities for environmental justice (Bullard 1993), the long history of community-based environmental work (Cole and Foster 2001), indigenous environmental knowledge and traditions (Cajete 1994), and community based efforts for environmental and human health protection (Bullard 1993). More importantly for the purposes of this paper, it set in motion the development of a cultural critique of environmental education as it was then practiced, and is still, to a greater or lesser extent today (Grass, 1995, Agyeman, 2002)

Environmental education is broadly understood to be a multi-disciplinary, non-advocacy educational process focused on the environment and human impacts upon it, with the goal of developing an informed citizenry who can take responsible action. The North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) argue that:

*"Environmental education is a process which promotes the analysis and understanding of environmental issues and questions as the basis for effective education, problem solving, policy-making and management. The purpose of environmental education is to foster the education of skilled individuals able to understand environmental problems and possessing the expertise to solve them. In the broader context, environmental education's purpose is to assist in the development of a citizenry conscious of the scope and complexity of current and emerging environmental problems and supportive of policies which are ecologically sound."* (NAAEE 1983)

Suffice it to say, when many environmental educators addresses topics such as human communities, the built environment, and even ecosystem issues, they do so in a fashion seemingly outside of a cultural and socio-political matrix and disconnected from issues and considerations of social justice. Though non-advocacy as a bedrock principle characterizes environmental education it draws upon the mainstream environmental advocacy movement in a number of ways:

- It (in its most recent incarnation, as opposed to 'nature' study' which is older) shares a common or parallel path of origin with the environmental movement, traceable at least as far back as the first Earth Day and the explosion of interest in environmental matters in the 1960s.

- The majority of its practitioners share a similar demographic with mainstream environmental advocacy organizations (Euro-American) and are drawn from middle and upper class strata of society (Taylor 2002). It is the truncated interest base and the lack of cultural diversity amongst the ranks of mainstream environmental educators which formed the basis upon which the Environmental Justice movement first took issue in the Letter to the Group of 10 in March of 1990. In that letter, Environmental Justice advocates laid out a critical analysis of mainstream environmental organizations and made a host of demands (Cole 1992)
- Many of the mainstream environmental organizations with which the Environmental Justice movement took issue have extensive environmental education programs which reflect ecosystem based concerns, e.g. a focus on natural resources and wildlife generally without consideration of cultural or social justice issues.

Like its relatives in the advocacy field, the Environmental Education establishment was made stunningly aware that it faced a set of systemic and cultural issues that prevented it from reaching its fundamental mission. In the ensuing decade since the first National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, the field of environmental education has become more aware, has taken steps to address the core issues articulated by the environmental justice movement. In 2002, the NAAEE Board of Directors adopted a position statement on diversity and accepted a set of recommended actions for both diversifying NAAEE and helping to diversify the field of environmental education. The position statement recognizes the integral connections between environmental concerns and wider questions of social needs, welfare and economic opportunity. It also acknowledges the need for greater emphasis on equity and celebration of diversity within NAAEE and in the field of environmental education

However, according to some observers and practitioners, the wider movement has yet to fully grasp and effectively address the systemic, cultural and political issues raised by the emergence of the environmental justice movement as a national force in the 1990s together with the sea-change in racial and ethnic demographics of society in general, and cities in particular.

### **Environmental Education, Social Justice and Civil Rights**

The failure of the majority of the environmental education movement to address issues of environmental justice, that is to address traditional social justice issues such as power, from an environmental perspective, or within an environmental context, and to systematically address the lack of diversity in the field is a critical issue. These factors and the resulting lack of relevant and culturally inherent environmental education resources available to low income children, and schools serving children of color, frames the issue squarely as a core civil rights issue: equal access to education and educational resources.

This failure has occurred despite the far sightedness of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), Commission on Multicultural Education's (1978) policy statement: 'No One Model American'. In a plea for cultural pluralism in education, which rejects assimilation and separatism, the AACTE argue for the teaching of values which support cultural diversity and individual uniqueness; the access of all cultures; the support of explorations in alternative and emerging lifestyles and the support of multiculturalism, multilingualism and multidialectism.

In this vein, Agyeman (2002:9/10) asks:

*"will reformist strategies change minds and curricula or do they just help people think we're changing? The Environmental Education Council of Ohio recently held their 35th annual conference entitled 'Diversity Matters: Nature, Culture and Environmental Education'. The conference was arranged around four strands namely 'nurturing diverse perspectives', 'developing pragmatic approaches', 'managing environmental education organizations' and 'reaching diverse audiences' Individual sessions with titles such as 'current ee research' (not even 'alternative', or 'future'), 'nature study in the paved environment', 'relating to multicultural audiences' (my italics) and 'marketing to urban audiences' highlight the pitfalls of token reformism. Nowhere is a discussion of power, race, class, gender, sexuality, ability/disability*

*hinted at, never mind mentioned. Yet conferences such as this are the norm in Western/conventional models of environmental education."*

### **The Role of Environmental Education in Reproducing an Exclusionary and Exclusive Environmental Ideology**

What the Letter to the Group of 10 pointed to was the systematic exclusion of the perspectives of people of color and low income communities and the subsequent lack of representation of issues impacting these communities. The role of environmental education in maintaining and reproducing an exclusionary environmental agenda is clear. Environmental curricula and pedagogies which don't reflect multiple cultural perspectives or address the social equity dimensions of issues, reinforce limited concepts of the environment and environmental protection; circumscribe and legitimate a partial environmental discourse and consequently do not produce informed students, committed graduates or empowered and enlightened environmental leaders.

For example, the Environmental Justice movement has effectively challenged the dominant concept of 'environment' championed by the mainstream environmental movement. Rather than referring to it as being solely about wilderness, nature and resources, the movement has redefined it as "where we live, work, learn, play and pray". In that conception, 'environment' has become a more holistic concept and with it, environmental policy-making and environmental discourse generally has, likewise, had to expand its boundaries. Yet, at the University level, where environmental studies and environmental education programs have proliferated for more than two decades, relatively few courses are offered on environmental justice or multicultural approaches. Similarly, there are few courses that explore multiple cultural perspectives on the environment, compared to those offering 'technical' or 'scientific' approaches. More recently however, social science departments are beginning to offer courses which make the connection between social justice and environmentalism. This should not let 'environmental' departments off the hook. With this in mind, it is worth revisiting the meaning of Principle 16 of the Principles of Environmental Justice.

### **Principle 16 of the Principles of Environmental Justice**

"Environmental justice calls for the education of present and future generations which emphasizes social and environmental issues, based on our experience and an appreciation of our diverse cultural perspectives."

The Principle makes it clear that social justice issues, cultural inclusion and cultural inherency should be key elements in shaping educational strategies for both environmental justice and environmental education. It makes explicit that the broadened environmental agenda described by the Environmental Justice movement (which is now increasingly accepted in the mainstream), is inextricably linked to a social justice agenda and that the articulation of that agenda is voiced best by those who wage the struggle. "We speak for ourselves" therefore simultaneously becomes a *motto*, a *mandate* and a *movement*.

Principle 16 aligns the Environmental Justice movement more closely in many ways to the field of multicultural education, with its commitment to equal access, to educational success, to empowerment, to building community based on respect for difference and to transformation of social conditions, than to environmental education (Sleeter 1991, hooks 1994, Young 1990). There are decades of work in developing the content and pedagogies of multicultural education, which are of particular relevance to an environmental education searching for connections to cultural diversity and social justice. In Principle 16, the Environmental Justice movement has pointed the way and sparked new models including the development of a synthesis of the two fields known as *multicultural* and *environmental* education which Grass (1996:1) characterizes as follows:

*"You are holding a powerful tool in your hands. It's a vehicle for voices, a link in a chain, a counter-narrative, an expose, a source of inspiration and therefore hope; it is also a continuing sign of the birth of new perspectives and values and a new field of theory and practice within environmental education: multicultural environmental education."*

Other encouraging moves in this direction include the devotion of an issue of the Canadian Journal of Education to 'Culturing Environmental Education'. This is the first academic environmental education research journal to do this. Agyeman (2002: 7), building on Grass's (1996) thoughts, notes that "culturing approaches to environmental education acknowledge, welcome and celebrate these numerous (new) voices, counter-narratives, identities and discourses and respect the validity of their inputs."

Another positive move is the emergence of 'education for sustainability' (see for example Tilbury 1995, Huckle and Sterling 1996 or Fien 1997). This broader approach, which is now official UN-speak, rather than environmental education, developed out of the 1992 United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (The Rio Earth Summit). Its major output, Agenda 21, called for, as a major priority, a reorientation of education towards sustainability. If, as Agyeman, Bullard and Evans (2002:78) argue that the focus of sustainability "should be to ensure a better quality of life for all, that this should be done in a just and equitable manner, whilst living within the limits of supporting ecosystems", then the educational process which flows from it, promises more commitment to justice and equity at both the theoretical and practical levels. Although the driving force for education for sustainability lies outside the US (largely in Europe and Australia), there are a growing number of excellent US resources such as The Report of the 1994 National Forum on Partnerships Supporting Education about the Environment 'Education for Sustainability: An Agenda for Action' and The 1997 Report of the Task Force for Public Linkage, Dialogue and Education, both of the now defunct President's Council on Sustainable Development (and both of which highlight multicultural approaches) and McKeown's (2002) 'Education for Sustainable Development Toolkit' which recognizes and develops equity, justice and cultural issues.

### **Knowledge is Power: Education as a Critical Tool in Achieving and Maintaining Environmental Justice**

Every successful community organizing project has an effective education component or at least a component for the effective dissemination of information (Cole 1992, Mondros and Wilson 1994) Over the long term, effective organizing requires efforts to educate communities to understand the issues, solutions, the public policy process, alternative futures within reach, the health impacts of pollution, etc. The Environmental Justice movement has stressed the need for greater access to information resources and educational programs for communities in the interest of furthering environmental justice. (Cole 1992, Wright 1995, Taylor 1992) If community members are to be able to work the public policy process, to protect themselves and their communities from environmental harm at the level of their families and neighborhoods and if effective monitoring of industry and government is to occur, communities need access to information and technical training with immediate relevance to the issues at hand as well as a longer term-perspective inclusive of a deep knowledge of place, socially, culturally and ecologically (Gauna 2002) Such a vision has called forth new models of environmental education pioneered and innovated by communities, community based organizations, and organizations allied with communities such as non-profit organizations and academic institutions.

### **From Principle to Practice: Innovations Spawned by the Environmental Justice Movement**

In this section, we detail Principle 16 in practice, by highlighting community-based, non-profit, academic courses and clinical programs. These list of examples are by no means exclusive or prioritized in terms of importance or quality but are intended to direct the reader to efforts illustrative of innovation and best practice in utilizing education to further Environmental Justice.

#### **Community-Based**

Southwest Organizing Project, Albuquerque

<http://www.swop.net>

WHEACT, Harlem, New York.

<http://www.wheact.org>

REEP, Roxbury, Boston

<http://www.ace-ej.org/>

Environmental Health Coalition, San Diego

<http://www.environmentalhealth.org>

## **Non-profit**

### **Three Circles Center**

The TCC introduces, encourages and cultivates multicultural perspectives and values in environmental and outdoor education, recreation and interpretation. The Center works with communities, teachers, practitioners and academics in educational and professional fields of significance to the environmental Justice movement.

## **Academic Courses and Clinical Programs**

### **Deep South Center, Xavier University**

<http://www.xula.edu/dscej/>

### **Environmental Justice Resource Center, Clark University, Atlanta**

<http://www.ejrc.cau.edu/>

### **University of Michigan, Environmental Justice Program**

<http://www.snre.umich.edu/ej/>

### **Tulane Environmental Law Clinic**

<http://www.tulane.edu/~telc/index.html>

### **Golden Gate University Environmental Justice Law Clinic**

<http://www.ggu.edu/schools/law/programs/jd/clinics/eljc.html>

### **Stanford Environmental Justice Law Clinic**

<http://www.law.stanford.edu/naturalresources/Clinic.PDF>

### **Department of Urban Environmental Policy and Planning, Tufts University**

<http://ase.tufts.edu/uep/>

## **Recommendations**

Clearly, there is plenty of innovation at both theoretical and practical levels. The challenge is, how do we ‘mainstream’ it? Our recommendations are aimed at both the External (mainstream environmental education movement), and Internal (environmental justice movement) realms:

### **External**

- Continue to lobby the mainstream environmental education movement
- Work with, and coalition build with sympathetic groups

### **Internal**

- Survey and evaluate the educational practices of community based environmental justice programs and others to determine the extent of and effectiveness of their curricula and pedagogies
- Strengthen and support, i.e. build capacity within community based organizations to use sound educational practices and strategies to achieve environmental justice.
- Strengthen ties between community based organizations involved in environmental justice issues and established fields such as multicultural education, education for sustainability, community education and environmental education.

- Develop strategies and implementation plans to link environmental justice community based organizations and public schools at all levels including community colleges and universities.

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**Julian Agyeman** holds a PhD in Environmental Education from the University of London. He joined Tufts University in 1999. His current research interests include education for sustainability, environmental justice, community involvement in local environmental and sustainability policy, and developing sustainable communities. Dr. Agyeman serves on many committees and boards including The North American Association for Environmental Education and The Massachusetts Environmental Justice Advisory Committee (MEJAC). He is also an Honorary Committee Member of the Royal Geographical Society's Planning and Environmental Research Group. Dr. Agyeman has been invited to present at a wide range of conferences both in the United States and abroad and has published four books as well as numerous journal articles, book chapters, and newspaper articles.

**Running-Grass** is Executive Director (volunteer) of Three Circles Center for Multicultural Environmental Education based in Sausalito, California. He received his B.A. in International Relations at Eisenhower College in Seneca Falls, NY, did graduate work in Development Studies and philosophy at the University of Denver School of International Studies, and received a Masters of Science in Teaching and Environmental Studies at Antioch Graduate School in New Hampshire. Running-Grass has authored numerous articles on environmental education, edits the Journal of Culture, Ecology and Community and is writing a book on multicultural environmental education. He currently holds a position in the Environmental Justice Program at U.S. EPA, Region 9 where he specializes in Environmental Justice training.



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