

# Thoughts on Environmental Education

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**W**ere rich! Florida is one of the wealthier states in the nation, and the United States is one of the wealthiest nations in the world. We can make the most of our natural environment. Scientists already know how to create and manage our environment to keep it clean and ecologically intact. And Floridians want to do this. Floridians in general agree that a clean, healthy environment is a top priority. Scientists know how, we all want to, we have the money, so what is stopping us?

There must be something hindering us, because Florida does not have an adequate environmental program. How do we know? Florida is losing habitat at an alarming rate. The ecological functioning of our wetlands is degrading. Diseases caused by environmental factors, such as cancer, immune deficiency, and reproductive failure, are on the rise because people are constantly poisoned by toxins from agriculture and industry. In fact, we are unwittingly poisoning ourselves with toxic fumes from our own automobiles and the products we use in our homes. And biodiversity is being severely diminished on the one hand by development and on the other by invasive species that displace our native plants and animals. Is it so difficult to have a clean, safe, and healthy environment, that one of the richest states in the richest nation can't do it? What is the problem here?

Environmental education is the missing link. Florida has some, but needs more and better. For Floridians, environmental education must reach out to a diversity of people with a variety of world views, and must include the following:

1. **Caring.** Caring about people is the most important thing in the world, and there is never enough of this. But caring about one another has to include caring about nature. We must share a strong emotional connection with our native plants and animals, and with our place, Florida.

2. **Knowing.** Have you met the lizard on your front porch? The bug in the back? Probably you have, but if your neighbors don't share your familiarity with these plants and animals, you understand what different worlds your awareness puts you in. We all must be familiar with our natural landscape.

3. **Deep Understanding.** How does ecology work? Well, it's pretty complicated, and "food chains" and "the web of life" don't really do it justice, any more than a postcard takes you to Europe. There has to be a relevance to nature for a person that transcends the ordinary.

## **A NATURAL AESTHETIC**

Have you ever noticed how a person's aesthetic sense affects his or her behavior to-

Americans felt inferior to the English, and parroted their styles. Today, there are surprisingly significant environmental and monetary costs of lawn upkeep. But you won't hear about these from the turf industry.

It is sometimes difficult for people to see the beauty of a natural landscape, which to others may be obvious. Aesthetic values are deeply ingrained into people's psyche. If the basic values aren't there, it is very difficult to build them. As a result, that big green lawn looks awfully good to a lot of people. So much so, that people who do value the aesthetic quality of a natural landscape are often opposed by their unenlightened neighbors. We need a new perspective on aesthetic values. Why do Americans want their landscape to look like an English pasture? Do we really still think that England is

the epitome of civility, or have we developed some of our own national pride?

Where does an aesthetic sense come from? It is laid down at an early age, depending on unique personal experiences. Some people end up loving nature

and natural things, some don't. The people I know who do love nature developed their appreciation at a very early age, through a series of fun and exciting outdoor experiences, usually shared with a wise and loving mentor such as a teacher, older cousin, aunt, or grandfather.

If only the media were on our side, half the battle would be won. But news coverage of the natural world focuses on natural disasters. Our corporate-responsive news system does not want to expose the impact of the local development project on the environment. And even nature books and television shows invariably spotlight exotic plants and animals in foreign lands, implying that our local flora and fauna are uninteresting.

## **BONDING WITH NATURE**

This decade has seen advances in brain research which confirm that a child's earliest

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towards the environment? Aesthetics are a sense of artistic beauty, and are a powerful drive behind many lifestyle choices made on a daily basis. These add up, especially when it comes to our impact on our environment.

Take, for example, a person who recoils from the look and feel of plastic. If given a choice, he will buy biodegradable natural fiber clothing and live in a house made of wood or brick, not one covered by vinyl siding and carpeted with synthetic fabrics.

Think of lawns – an invention of British aristocracy. In England, from whence we borrowed our landscape aesthetics, lawns occur naturally as pastures. They once represented the wealth of the landowner, and were flaunted. Great pains were taken to make the lawn of an estate look immense. There is no practical or logical reason why so many Floridians should want a lawn. It's simply an aesthetic relic from the days when

# Thoughts on Environmental Education

continued from page 18

experiences are the most important. Early experiences will determine whether or not a child grows up with a wondrous love for nature.

Children are born into the world believing that it is intrinsically beautiful and good. In the past, a child's world was primarily made up of natural things. Children often had a wooded or semi-wild area nearby to explore, and unsupervised time to do it in. Farming brought people outdoors in all types of weather and in synch with the cycles of daylight and seasons. Even food from the grocery store was more natural – unpeeled, unwaxed, and unprocessed.


What is today's world like? Different. Natural areas have shrunk away from a child's doorstep. Things are processed and packaged until it's difficult to tell what they are or once were. Developed, highly populated areas grow and spread across the landscape, alienating us from the pleasures and mysteries of the natural world.

Our world has changed profoundly with respect to how people first come into contact with the natural world. Picture a baby's first contact with its environment: sucking on plastic nipples while wrapped in polyester clothing and paper or plastic diapers. Next comes playing with plastic toys and watching TV, punctuated by bouts on the turf with a vinyl ball, or maybe splashing in a chlorinated pool. Where is the fresh air, mud and dirt? What happened to sticks, leaves, bugs, lizards, and flowers?

A child of the past would learn the names of the trees, wildflowers, birds, and lizards

around them. Now children learn brand names and cartoon characters. Where a child would have learned the feeling and fragrances of soil, leaves, and sticks, the colors of pollen and flower petals, now they see and feel various synthetic toys such as Silly Putty and Play Doh. Dirt, leaves, and sticks, which must be the perfect developmental manipulative toys for young children, are replaced by regimented plastic toys such as Legos and Connex. These are the things our children learn to love and treasure.

## SOLUTIONS

You are the solution. Many of the details of your everyday life offer opportunities for choices that affect the environment. The activities you choose to do in your spare time are critical. Everyone can contribute to environmental education, by helping themselves and helping others. If there are young people in your life, your involvement with them can make a significant difference, whether you are a relative or friend of the family. It is uplifting to hear the stories of so many people who are reaching out to children and young people, and involving them in environmental activities. As a result, many young people are not afraid to take a leading role in pushing for changes that will protect and restore our environment. 

This short piece includes just a little bit of the introduction to what we hope might be a book (?) to come from two people, whose knowledge, talent, and lovely spirit you can begin to imagine by reading their words. Thank you, Marc and Maria, for all your good words and works.