PARTICIPATION IN COMMON ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVITIES IN AND OUT OF SCHOOL

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Summary

Historically, Western attitude to nature and the natural environment has been, and continues to be, profoundly anthropocentric and exploitative, and the origins of this attitude can be traced back to the Aristotelian world-view and indeed to the Judaeo-Christian tradition itself. Sadly, thanks to the gathering pace of globalization, the highly consumptive and polluting lifestyle born of this attitude is being successfully exported to the vast developing world, thus in many instances undermining their older cultural attitude of respecting and caring for *Mother Earth* and her abundant benediction that sustains all life on earth. Clearly, if we are at all serious about achieving even a modest degree of global environmental sustainability, the pervasive Western attitude must change to one that respects and cares for the environment.

It is argued that much can be achieved to this end by introducing environment or environment-related elements in children's common activities in and out of school, in addition to the environmental subjects in formal curricula which we discussed in *Environmental Curricula Development for Each Age Group*. While some of these activities relate to formal curricula, others are extracurricular in nature. It is argued, furthermore, that, in order to be effective, these activities must be designed and implemented for different age ranges in ways that give children ample enjoyment to satisfy their natural hedonistic orientation, and inform and educate them about the

environment at the same time.

1. Introduction

1.1. Respect for Nature and the Environment

In this theme we have consistently argued that how we treat nature and the natural environment is fundamentally determined by our attitude to them. Indeed, demonstrably our grossly exploitative attitude to the environment and natural resources in pursuit of what is perceived as economic development has been and continues to be responsible for the escalating degradation of earth's environmental capital. Therefore, if we are at all serious about achieving even a modest degree of global sustainability, our exploitative attitude to nature and the environment must give way to one of genuine respect and concern.

Psychologically human beings are fascinatingly complex creatures. Consequently a person's attitude, which is fundamentally shaped by the ethical and moral values he or she holds, is one of the hardest things to change, and no amount of science or technology, however clever, can be helpful in this regard. It is precisely for this reason that so far in this theme we have emphasized the need for instilling environment-respecting moral values, especially in the young. Interestingly, Article 2 of the Treaty of the European Union (TEU) states that EU's environmental policy objective shall include the goals of "sustainable and non-inflationary growth respecting the environment" (Lee, 1995). It is, however, curiously reticent about what "respecting the environment" is actually supposed to mean in practice.

The strategic rationale of respecting the environment is obvious to see, however. For if societies could be persuaded to respect the earth *truly* as *Mother Earth*, as has been the case in some of the older cultures (e.g. Indian), and to accept from her bountiful benediction only that which they needed, then, since people do not normally abuse of exploit their mothers, human societies would live in harmony with nature and sustainability would be assured. We concede, however, that in the real world of today (and especially in the profoundly materialistic developed countries) this prescription is likely to be seen as being far too idealistic to be realistic, and possibly even surreal. But then, what alternative is there, given the escalating degradation of the global environment which is putting at risk the very survival of the humankind in the long-term?

Of course there is the counter argument that clean or cleaner technologies, market forces and economic and regulatory instruments can be relied upon to alleviate or even solve environmental problems. Even the Brundtland Commission Report (WCED, 1987) tends to support this argument, and understandably so given that it is first and foremost a political document. We take the view, however, that in reality this argument is intellectually deficient as it is uninformed and naïve about human nature. Because, to put it crudely, if environmental problems could be alleviated or solved with such measures, why is the deterioration of the global environment continuing to accelerate? Certainly clean technologies can bring environmental benefits to a nation, but only if can afford them. Most of the poor nations cannot, and neither can even the mighty USA

as it would appear from that country's withdrawal from the Kyoto Agreement.

As for market forces and economic and regulatory instruments, we note that driven by greed both individuals and corporations always find, and will always find, ways and means to circumvent prevailing laws and regulations for greater profit. For example, in the USA there is a plethora of laws and regulations, as well as well-funded enforcing authorities, to monitor and ensure the financial probity of business corporations. And yet, in the first half of 2002 there have been a number of spectacular financial scandals involving some of the largest US corporations such as ENRON, WorldCom, TYCO and Anderson Consulting, while two of the largest finance houses, Merrill Lynch and CSFB have been penalized with enormous fines for deceiving the public to make greater profit.

Such selfish behavior is symptomatic of the pervasive and apparently insatiable "greed culture", and one may be forgiven for thinking that this list merely represents the tip of the proverbial "iceberg". The enormity of the implications of such behavior for corporate America, and by implication the rest of the world, is summed up by a recent comment of the Chairman and Chief Executive of Goldman Sachs, which is one of the world's largest investment banks. He said that America faced the biggest crisis of confidence in its capitalist system in his working lifetime (The *Daily Mirror*, London, 12 June 2002, page 6).

We submit, once again, that such behavior is fundamentally a product of attitude which, in turn, is shaped by one's moral values (also see the chapter entitled "Environmental Regulations and Standard Setting").

1.2. Greed, Avarice and Environment-respecting Moral Values

Arguably poverty and greed are the main reasons for the continuing degradation of the environment. However, whereas poverty can be alleviated by providing necessities to the poor or by empowering them with knowledge and skills, it is hard to see how greed or avarice could be controlled except by instilling effective moral values. Also, while it is easy to understand why a poor person may be driven to law-breaking, it is hard to understand why the rich are often so preoccupied with the need to become even richer. The reason is probably pathological — a serious avarice-induced condition that can only be treated with *conspicuous consumption*, or *Retail Therapy* which is now increasingly fashionable in the developed countries, for its temporary relief. The problem with greed, and especially avarice, is that it is open-ended — the more one has, the more one wants. The consequence of this phenomenon is reflected by wealth and income disparities both within and between nations. Even the ancient Greeks knew much about the open-ended, insatiable nature of greed (see Box 1).

"…there is no nobility in poverty. Greed works. Greed is good for you..."

Michael Douglas as Gordon Gekko in the film *Wall Street*

Interestingly, open-ended demand for consumer goods and services to ensure

uninterrupted growth of GDP is a necessary condition for the proper functioning of the capitalist economic system which is almost universal in its scope today. However, this contrasts with less consumptive and less polluting lifestyles, which societies everywhere are urged to adopt, without which sustainable development cannot be achieved (WCED, 1987). It is hard to see how this improbable juxtaposition could possibly be resolved in favor of sustainable development without resorting to moral rejuvenation as we have suggested.

In one of the comedies by the ancient Greek dramatist, *Aristophanes* (448-380 BC), there is a scene in which *Fortune* gives money away to the rich and the poor from all walks of life. He is blind, and so he does not know who is poor and who is rich.

But soon he realizes that the more money he gave away, the more they wanted. And so he concludes that people are never satisfied with what wealth they have.

Box 1: The open-ended nature of greed and avarice

School children in the age range of 8 to 18 are especially vulnerable to carefully crafted advertising messages that relentlessly, and in the main successfully, bombard them from every direction (also see Section 4.2.1 of *Methods of Environmental Teaching and Learning*). The purpose is to excite their desire (greed?) for ever greater consumption of goods and services so that in adulthood they will be conditioned to behave as efficient units of consumption. This is the current pattern of development of the rich Western societies, and it is putting them at serious risk of becoming spiritual wasteland where Mammon reigns supreme. Strangely, this unsustainable pattern of development, and the highly consumptive and polluting lifestyle it engenders, is being cleverly promoted by the West as the ideal to be emulated by all, and, sadly, developing countries *en masse* appear to be falling for it. And the process is being reinforced and hastened by the gathering pace of globalization.

1.3. Potential Role of Common Environmental Activities in and out of School

In *Environmental Curricula Development for Each Age Group* we focused on the development of environmental curricula for schools and suggested a generic syllabus from which an appropriate number of formal environmental subjects are to be developed for secondary education. We note, however, that children also participate in a variety of common activities such as games, plays, etc. both in and out of school. Therefore, in order to derive synergy for maximum impact, it would be an excellent idea to design and organize those activities in ways that directly, indirectly or even subliminally supplement and reinforce what children learn from formal environmental curricula. Such activities can and should be designed imaginatively to reinforce environment-respecting moral values in children.

In the light of what we said in Section1.2, instilling truly environment-respecting moral values in the young of today is no mean challenge. Despite best of intentions, the scope of formal curricula in this regard tends to be constrained by a number of factors, chiefly lack of appreciation by pupils of how those values relate to *their world* as they see it

(also see Section 2.4 of *Environmental Curricula Development for Each Age Group*). This factor, more than any other, can and does dissipate their interest in the subject as experience clearly shows. However, if invoked imaginatively and integrated into children's common activities in and out of school in an interesting way, the mythological, philosophical and religious rituals and traditions can do a great deal to connect environment-respecting moral values to the *real world* of children as they see it. And, it is precisely in this arena that imaginatively designed and well executed common environmental activities can have an important role to play. Clearly such activities, to be performed both in and out of school, should be designed and executed with particular reference to local tradition, culture and sensitivities (also see Section 4.2 of *Importance of Teaching Environmental Education at an Early Age*).

However, before we go any further, it would be instructive to examine how we managed to get here. More precisely, how did the humankind, so eloquently celebrated in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (see below), manage to so degrade the environment which sustains all life on earth that their very survival in the long-term is thrown into question?

> *"What a piece of work is man!*
> *How noble the reason!*
> *How infinite in faculty, in form, in moving!*
> *How express and admirable!*
> *In action how like an angel!*
> *In appreciation how like a god!"*
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> (Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2)

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Biographical Sketch

Professor Bhaskar Nath received his Bachelor's degree in Civil Engineering from the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, India, in 1960, followed by the Ph.D. degree from the University of Wales, UK, in 1964. In 1983 he was awarded the D.Sc. degree by the University of London for his outstanding original research (according to citation) in numerical mathematics. In 2001 he was awarded the *Doctor Honoris Causa* (Dr.H.C.) by the University of Chemical Technology and Metallurgy, Sofia, Bulgaria, for his contribution to environmental education.

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