

THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR AND INITIATIVES IN ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

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Summary

The significance of the voluntary sector groups was recognized by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987 and the Commission identified a need for substantial strengthening of their capacities, for example, by political recognition, financial support, networking and cooperation. The voluntary sector has become increasingly important in environmental issues since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. The sector is difficult to define clearly because it includes a wide range of individuals, formal and informal groups and organizations. This study concentrates on the role of individuals and environmental non-governmental organizations NGOs.

The role of individuals is important in raising public awareness of environmental issues. Individuals can raise public awareness by writing and speaking about issues, by campaigning, and by action, and some have given their lives fighting for environmental justice. The strength of NGOs lies particularly in their ability to develop and deliver environmental education using more informal methods such as: providing public information; public awareness campaigns to promote more active debate on environmental issues; local, national or international projects; and partnerships and green alliances. The involvement of individual citizens is essential in order to achieve sustainable development, and therefore the involvement of the voluntary sector is crucial to the successful implementation of sustainability at global, national and local levels.

1. Introduction

The voluntary sector has become increasingly important in environmental issues since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. Many environmental groups had already been active for some time, for example Greenpeace was founded in 1971. Some environmental groups especially in the field of conservation have a much longer history. Established in 1892, the Sierra Club in the USA was the first NGO formed for nature conservation

The voluntary sector is difficult to define clearly because it includes such a wide range of individuals, formal and informal groups and organizations. A list of potential voluntary sector participants could include the following:

- Academic and research institutions;
- Community groups;
- Environmental organizations;
- Professional associations;
- Trade unions;
- Individual members of the public.

In this chapter the role of individual members of the public and environmental organizations and community groups are included. Environmental organizations and community groups are considered to be non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Some of these non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are only interested in local issues or a relatively small geographically defined area. Other NGOs are concerned with national and/or global issues. An important strength of environmental NGOs is that the organization usually has members who are “close to the problem or issue”. A second important strength is that the organization is usually able to take a long-term view where necessary. This contrasts with the short-term view unfortunately so often taken by elected democratic governments.

The activities undertaken by individuals and NGOs include: campaigning, publicity, education, representation, protest, and action. In practice these activities usually overlap with one another and are not clearly defined. Indeed, campaigning, publicity, representation, protest and action, can all be considered as part of the education process. Environmental systems are very complex and the public issues which arise concerning the environment are therefore also complex. Informal rather than formal methods of education are often more appropriate for conveying these complex issues to the general public.

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Biographical Sketch

Professor David Cawsey has an honours degree in Geology and a doctorate in Civil Engineering. He is a Chartered Geologist and a Fellow of the Geological Society of London. His wide experience includes working for central and local governments, higher education, and industry in engineering geology and subsequently in environmental engineering and management. He is the author of more than 50 publications in these fields. Other professional activities have included leading successful international environmental and training programs, and acting as external examiner and adviser for degree programs and doctorates. He now combines some university teaching with consultancy and professional activities.

Professor Cawsey has spent most of his career in university teaching and research, especially collaborative research projects with industry and local authorities. He has recently left his post as a director of a university school of the environment to concentrate on consultancy, teaching and other professional activities. His experience includes involvement in many European-wide environmental programs, and he was recently involved in coordinating the development and implementation of a new European training course including modules on sustainable development, life cycle assessment and environmental management systems.