

# EXPLORING PATHWAYS TO SUSTAINABLE LIVING: EMANCIPATORY ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

**A.E.J. Wals**

*Communication & Innovation Studies, Wageningen University, The Netherlands*

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## Summary

Environmental education can be an important tool in helping people to explore and develop more sustainable lifestyles. For environmental education to be truly educational, it should be distinguished from other social instruments such as propaganda, extension, and communication. These methods leave learners little or no room for autonomy, self-responsibility, and self-determination in working toward intrinsically motivated changes in lifestyles, as opposed to extrinsically driven and predetermined and expert-determined changes in specific environmental attitudes, values, and behaviors. Emancipatory environmental education focuses on the development of the whole human being and seeks to anchor sustainable lifestyles in strong emotional, ecological, ethical, and political foundations. These foundations need to be established through a learning process that is constructive (building upon the ideas and the life-world of the learner), critical (challenging underlying assumptions and value claims), emancipatory (overcoming power distortions and social and environmental inequity), and transformative (changing lifestyles through the development of action competence and learner empowerment). Criteria and concepts for emancipatory environmental education are described.

## 1. Introduction

Environmental education has become an important element of environmental policymaking and sustainable development strategies. The seeds planted in the 1970s at many international conferences on environmental education by some of the pioneers in this developing field found a fertile soil of broad-based mutual concern for the environment in the 1980s and 1990s. At the UNCED Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, special attention was given to the theme of environmental education. *Agenda 21* contains specific chapters on the role of education and training as a means of realizing sustainable development. The role of education and communication in promoting sustainable lifestyles was also emphasized during the Rio Plus Ten Earth Summit in Johannesburg in 2002.

Many educational policies of a variety of governments both in the North and the South call for the integration of environmental education in the formal education system. They stress the role of education in developing a support base for environmental policy and legislation, and for local environmental initiatives, such as Local Agenda 21 (LA 21). At the same time business and industry also have discovered environmental education as a public relations tool. Some sponsor the production of environmental education materials, some donate money to environmental education organizations, and some employ their own environmental education officers or consultants. It is clear that the worldwide development of environmental education in formal and nonformal education is ongoing.

With the rapid development of environmental education, a variety of key issues need to be addressed, including:

- When can we call something environmental education, and how does it compare with other social instruments?
- How can environmental education contribute to sustainable living?
- What are the ethical and philosophical considerations of education about (and above all for) the environment?
- What educational strategies are most appropriate for the development of sustainability that is based on the empowerment and action competence of local communities?

The potential role of environmental education in moving toward sustainable living will be explored. Environmental education is viewed as a means to help individuals, groups, and communities to develop their own pathways to sustainable living, whereby sustainable living is something to be determined contextually in an open-ended, participatory process. Environmental education will be positioned within the wide arsenal of so-called social instruments available to influence and/or educate citizens. It will become clear that in environmental education, the emphasis lies on educating people and not on persuading, influencing, or manipulating them toward a predetermined and expert-determined way of thinking and behaving which supposedly is to lead toward a healthier planet. Having made this important distinction, I will describe the origins, main interpretations, and key components of environmental education and its potential contribution to sustainable living.

## **2. Social Instruments in Environmental Policymaking**

Since the 1970s, a great variety of (semi) social policy instruments have been developed to help governments at all levels to create a support base for environmental decisionmaking. Some of these instruments include: legislation, incentive plans, environmental impact statements, multilateral conventions, extension programs, public awareness campaigns, and education. Some of these instruments use reward and punishment to tempt people to behave differently, others use persuasion or conviction, and again others use consensus seeking, conflict management, and dialogue as their main tool for changing citizens or citizens' behavior. Environmental education, communication, extension, and training are often used interchangeably to describe systematically organized and carefully planned communication and learning processes geared toward specific groups within society in an attempt to shape and influence people's environmental thinking and acting.

A continuum can be used to indicate the different levels of self-determination, self-responsibility, and autonomy people can exercise within environmental learning processes. The degree of autonomy, self-responsibility, and self-determination refers to the amount of space people have for making their own choices, developing their own possibilities to act, and for taking responsibility for their own thinking and acting. At one extreme, we find environmental propaganda characterized by a low degree of autonomy, self-responsibility, and self-determination. At the other extreme, we find environmental education, which in its most genuine understanding is characterized by a high degree of autonomy, self-responsibility, and self-determination. Somewhere in between we can place environmental extension and communication, some of which is characterized by an emphasis on persuasion (lower degree of autonomy and self-determination), and some of which is characterized by an emphasis on education (higher degree of autonomy and self-determination).

Education here refers to carefully prepared, planned, and guided learning processes during which knowledge, values, and action competence (head, heart, and hands) develop in harmony to increase an individual's or a group's possibilities to participate more fully in life and society. From a pedagogical point of view it is undesirable when the goals of education are determined by outside experts or authorities who are not an integral part of the community of learners who take center stage in the educational process. Education differs from *training* in that training refers to the acquisition of skills and abilities that have instrumental connotations and can technically occur through repetition and practice without leading to understanding (e.g., memorizing a list of endangered species for an exam or learning where to throw your glass, aluminum, or paper). In this essay, the educational, or rather the pedagogical, aspect of environmental education takes center stage.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Arjen E.J. Wals** is a senior environmental education researcher the Department of Social Sciences at Wageningen University. His Ph.D., obtained from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, MI, US, focused on young adolescents' perceptions of nature and environmental issues and their implications for environmental education. Recent research focused on the greening of vocational agricultural education in The Netherlands, action research and community problem-solving as a methodology for environmental education, and contextualizing sustainability and biodiversity through environmental education. He is the past Chair of the Special Interest Group on Ecological and Environmental Education of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and serves on the editorial boards of *Environmental Education Research*, *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, *Local Environment*, and *Tópicos en Educación Ambiental*.