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“WHAT IS HERE?”**Some foundations to envision community and place based environmental education**

Why organize an EECOM conference about community- and place-based environmental education? After some discussions, searching for a theme, it appeared to conference organizers that “place” and “community” were key locus for environmental education and that they could help sustain an integration process. Following are some other possible reasons.

History: Community and place can help recreate links to some historical roots of environmental education: people caring about the place where they live. Stated by David Orr, “The environmental movement has grown out of the efforts of courageous people to preserve and protect particular places,” (Orr, 1994, p. 161) to which we can add their efforts to educate about such places. Community and place can provide focus and anchoring.

Scale: Discourse and practice in environmental education have a strong global bent, somehow distorting the local outlook, as if the world could only be seen through a global lens. Consider “Agenda 21” and even “Local Agenda 21”. The Johannesburg Summit will probably further drive an agenda negotiated between national leaders. Such an “inter-national” agenda trickles to more local levels, with actions, educational or other, not automatically congruent with the life of specific communities.

Wendell Berry raises three questions, “that must be asked with respect to a human economy in any given place: 1. What is here? 2. What will nature permit us to do here? 3. What will nature help us do here?” (Berry, 1987, p. 146). Asking such questions could divert educational approaches that foster global placelessness especially since, according to Berry, “local life may be as much endangered by those who would ‘save the planet’ as by those who would ‘conquer the world.’ For ‘saving the planet’ calls for abstract purposes and central powers that cannot know – and thus will destroy – the integrity of local nature and local community.” (Berry, 1992, p. 23)

Envisioning community revival, Berry believes it, “would have to be a revival accomplished mainly by the community itself. It would have to be done not from the outside by the instruction of visiting experts, but from the inside by the ancient rule of neighborliness, by the love of precious things, and by the wish to be at home.” (Berry, 1990, p. 169)

Focus: Environmental education has often been problem- or issue focused. Community- and place-based environmental education invites stepping aside, even if temporarily, from the “problem-solution” posture to look, with a refocused lens, at “What is here?”

Barry Lopez recalls, “The most moving moment [he] ever saw from a child in the woods.” He and the child were, “on a mud bar by the footprints of a heron...[on their] knees, making handprints beside the footprints... The [child’s] look said: I did not know until now that I needed someone much older to confirm this, the feeling I have for life here. I can now grow older, knowing it need never be lost.” (Lopez, 1989, p. 150). This also exemplifies an intergenerational encounter arising within an encounter with nature.

Language: Strangely, environmental educators sometimes talk an Orwellian, “Newspeak” language of “Prepcom,” “Chapter 36,” and “LA21.” Is there more familiarity with a global newspeak than with the place where they live? Come spring, can they adequately talk about the life of the first plant to bloom in their locality?

Somewhat resonating with Gary Snyder’s “tawny grammar,” (1990, p. 76), Italian novelist and essayist Italo Calvino offers this reflection: “I think our basic mental processes have come down to us through every period of history, ever since the times of our Paleolithic forefathers, who were hunters and gatherers. The word connects the visible trace with the invisible thing, the absent thing, the thing that is desired or feared, like a frail emergency bridge flung over an abyss. For this reason, the proper use of language, for me personally, is the one that enables us to approach things (present or absent) with discretion, attention, and caution, with respect for what the things (present or absent) communicate without words.” (Calvino, 1988, p. 77) Can we find or recover a language that truly resonates with the life of our respective communities and with the myriad of particular places?

Hence the motive to organize a conference theme around educating ourselves more about the possibilities and the limitations of community- and place-based environmental education.

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