

# Programs for Futures Education

Presentation to the CACOR Conference, Ottawa, June 15th 1993

by

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It is a great honour and a pleasure to address the CACOR Annual Conference and General Meeting on the topic of "Programs for Futures Education", related to my experience at the University of Guelph.

One only has to scan recent CACOR newsletters and books such as "The First Global Revolution" to realize that the future is a very real concern. At the close of the second millennium, our confident belief in the future of humanity is being reshaped from a linear progression to a curving question mark. Tomorrow - the future - is no longer taken for granted. I am not going to discuss the causes or extent of the "Problematique" or the "Predicament of Man" or whatever we want to call this sense of foreboding about our present path. What I do want to discuss is the response and role of education in light of these concerns.

In this, we need to focus on education that is not so much about the future as it is for the sake of the future, and on education that leads beyond learning to action. The state of the environment is one of the essential foundations of the problematique. Buzz Nixon eloquently argued in a recent CACOR Newsletter about the need for recognition of a "sustainable ecosphere" as a priority objective<sup>1</sup>. I firmly agree, and would like to add that when we consider environmental education, it is not the environment that is the problem but the actions of people within the environment; it is not the planet that needs "managing", but people.

I work at The Arboretum, which is a 165 ha site within the University of Guelph that has a mandate to provide environmental education. The Arboretum is an ideal place for interdisciplinary education. It is visited by several thousand members of the general public and the

academic community throughout the year. It is not tied to any one faculty. The extensive grounds and three buildings (a nature centre, an administrative centre with auditorium and boardroom, and the grounds maintenance facility) allow it to provide for education within and outside walls, and education without barriers of age. It is a place for experiential education -practical "hands-on" learning about the environment - about ourselves within the environment. As I will discuss later, this is important, particularly in terms of how we respond to the challenges and realities of the future.

Since 1986, I have been closely involved with writing and teaching an interdisciplinary environmental education course based at The Arboretum, which goes by the rather curious title of "The 5000 Days". The course tries to weave the strands of the problematique, and includes social, economic and spiritual issues together with the environmental considerations. It is taught through distance education, which makes it available to a wide range of students from coast to coast across Canada. When it was first offered six years ago, enrolment was about 24 students; there were 324 students enrolled in the most recent semester (Spring 1993). In terms of student enrolment and response, "The 5000 Days" has been a great success, and has now been taken by approximately 3,000 undergraduate and adult students, both on and off campus. In addition, TVO (TV-Ontario) is presently developing an educational television series based on "The 5000 Days", and so it will in the future be exposed to a potentially much larger audience.

I am not the only person who has had close involvement with "The 5000 Days" course. CACOR itself, and the Club of Rome internationally, was a driving force behind its development. Alexander King provides the introduction to the course manual. Professor Keith Ronald, whom most of you know as a colleague and fellow CACOR member, has been

<sup>1</sup> See C.R. (Buzz) Nixon, *Sustainable Development: A Mirage and a Dangerous Trap*, CACOR Proceedings March 1993, Series 1(5):16-26.

pivotal in the course from its earliest stages. CACOR member and Guelph resident Ken Hammond has been and continues to be in many ways the 'conscience' of the course. Rennie Whitehead and Buzz Nixon have attended student gatherings and provided sage advice. Arboretum Director and new CACOR member Professor Alan Watson brings to the course many years of interest and experience in adult education and nature interpretation.

Through the generosity of Dr. Whitehead and Dr. Tom de Fayer, The Arboretum is now a repository for some Club of Rome and CACOR archive materials and newsletters. This has tremendous potential for study by university students in courses such as "The 5000 Days" as well as interested members of the academic community and the general public. We hope to expand the collection with the cooperation of CACOR and its members.

One of the root causes of the problematique, particularly in the developed world, has been our predilection for claiming that we know the solutions and hold the prescription for the rest of the world to follow. In light of this, I don't want to suggest that The Arboretum's approaches to environmental education are the only solution; they represent an approach that makes sense to us now, here, in our experience. An integral part of The Arboretum's approach to environmental education is a focus on interactive learning, on shared experience, and on listening to and learning from each other. My conversations with students indicate that learning about their place in the environment is an opening process that leads to a desire to learn more about other, related issues. This may be comforting to those who fear environmentally-educated adults becoming a sort of "eco-police"; my experience suggests that exposure to environmental concerns makes people more open and willing to listen to other viewpoints and to explore other approaches.

When we think about effective education for the future, we cannot assume that there is consensus or even clarity about the goal. What type of future are we striving to create through education? Whose future? Is the goal a human future - and perhaps even the best possible future for a fortunate few - or is the goal a more humane future? Are we hoping (I would say unrealistically) to maintain the status quo, and to cling to prevalent ideas of continued consumption and economic growth? We need to be clear on what we are educating towards, and the type of future we want

to build. All of this involves conscious choices and compromises.

My experiences at The Arboretum have been primarily limited to a privileged group of literate, northern, predominantly urban university students. However, when we speak of the need to create a new perspective on the world, this is a particularly critical group. It is a group with a disproportionate amount of future responsibility in terms of consumption, in terms of having the luxury of choice, and in terms of potential to bring about change.

Most Canadians -- and certainly most of us fortunate enough to benefit from higher education -- lead privileged lives; in our discussions, we often overlook that the future we fear and seek to avoid is the reality now in much of the world and, increasingly, within our own country. The time for action cannot be put off until tomorrow; the future is being determined today. There are already many portents and signals from within our own borders: e.g. economic recession, the collapse of the cod fishery, the depletion of the temperate rainforest. We cannot expect or wait for a scenario in which Canadians wake up one morning, find that their familiar world has collapsed suddenly overnight, and are then spurred to take rapid and decisive action. The boundaries between the present and the future are more subtle, involving a gradual acclimatization and acceptance of environmental and social degradation. I am often reminded of T.S. Eliot's quietly ominous words: "This is the way the world ends, not with a bang but a whimper".

The goal of education in our competitive urban consumer society is usually economic; i.e. a more highly-paid job. I think that the true value of education lies in its moral and ethical objectives, perhaps now more than ever before. Viewed in this light, the educational "payoff" is not so much for the individual as it is for the individual within the community, whether the boundaries of that community are local or global. Environmental education is about community and communication and compassion. These are critical elements in achieving change.

There must be a critical link between education and action. Knowledge alone is not enough. With the extended reach of the mass media and the impact of technology, the perceptual boundaries between the local and the global are becoming increasingly blurred. But what happens when students are asked to think

from a global perspective? Or when people are confronted with the possibility of environmental and social catastrophe on a global scale? Those of us concerned with environmental and future education must consider that admonishments to "Think globally, act locally" can be overpowering, numbing and paralyzing in terms of action.

Educators must provide hope, and help students to find the critical balance between urgency and possibility. The reaction must not be "The problems are too great, and I cannot do anything", but instead "I cannot do everything, but I can do something". "The 5000 Days" course tries to do this through Essay Questions and supplementary "Green Sheets" that are designed to take students beyond the course manual. For example, we ask students to write a "Letter to the Editor" in response to a given article, so that they gain practical experience in one type of action. We ask them to write an essay placing themselves ten years in the future: to imagine and explore an issue of particular interest, predict the situation at that time, and analyze their role in the process by which change "did" or "didn't" happen. In these and other ways, students gain some experiential realization that these issues are not for others, but for themselves, and that their actions -- or lack of action -- today will likely have a great impact on their future.

There is another critical pitfall that we have not yet fully confronted in environmental education: learning itself can become a substitute for action<sup>2</sup>. Learning is a passive behaviour. It feels good to learn, particularly about altruistic issues such as the environment. Under stress or fear, environmental learning can become a panacea, therapeutic, a way of feeling one is doing something without really doing anything.

Paradoxically, one constant in the world today is accelerated change. I believe that the role of environmental educators is not to so much give the answers (even if we know them with any certainty!) as it is to help students to ask the critical questions, to debate the possibilities, and to see the linkages that are often missed. Traditionally, education tends to rely on conformity and has been based on dissemination of information, in blocks, with answers, stressing concepts rather than experiences. The inter-

disciplinary and experiential aspect of education about the environment and for the future is critical, if we want to reach a wide range of people and provide for a wide range of solutions.

People live in an increasingly urban, technological world, detached from nature. In 1920, just 20% of the world's people lived in cities; between 1920 and 2000, it is projected that urban populations will have grown five times faster than rural, and for the first time in human history more people will live in cities than in rural areas.<sup>3</sup> For increasing numbers of North Americans, the shopping mall and the Nintendo screen provide the basis for their formative experiences. This is particularly sobering in terms of building the linkage between environmental knowledge and action. A survey of students in the course who had gone on to take action -- to move from "I know" to "I care" to "I can do something" -- underlined the critical importance of having some direct experience of nature. This is confirmed by other studies; nature experiences seem to be a necessary condition for anything more than minimal environmentally-responsible behaviour<sup>4</sup>. But how are people going to continue to be provided with direct experience of nature in an increasingly urban world? This is a challenge that The Arboretum is striving to address, very directly, not just for university students but for people of all ages and from all sectors.

In terms of education about and for the future, we face a tremendous challenge today. It is not enough to know; we must also act. We must continue to find ways to strengthen human realization that we are not autonomous, but rooted within the natural world. Our hope at The Arboretum is that you will join with us in meeting this challenge. We invite CACOR members, and Club of Rome members internationally, to join us by sharing your thoughts and ideas from a broad base of disciplines and experience, so that we may learn together and, most importantly, act together, for the sake of today and for the hope of tomorrow.

<sup>2</sup> Finger, M. (May 1993), *Does environmental learning translate into more responsible behaviour?* Nature Herald, IUCN The World Conservation Union Newsletter, Issue No. 4, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Harker, H.J., , *Urban myths and realities*, Development, p. 22, Winter 1987-88

<sup>4</sup> Finger, M. (May 1993), *Does environmental learning translate into more responsible behaviour?*, Nature Herald, IUCN The World Conservation Union Newsletter, Issue No. 4, p. 9.