

# A Network of Regional Centres of Environmental Education and Training: A Strategy for Developing Countries

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**The resource-rich countries in ASEAN and similar countries in the Tropical Zone are faced with three environmental problems: exhaustion and degradation of their terrestrial ecosystems, degradation of the coastal environment and its ecosystem, and environmental pollution due to industrial and urban wastes.**

**A critical problem in these countries, however, is the shortage of trained and experienced manpower to implement policies and programs for natural resource management and pollution control, particularly in the country-side.**

**There is a clear need for encouraging, even institutionalizing, close and effective collaboration between the education sector and environment agencies towards the goal of incorporating environmental education and training as an essential component of the development process.**

**It is suggested that one suitable strategy to respond to this challenge is the establishment of a network of regional centres of environmental education and training. These centres, hosted by a regional university preferably the most prestigious in the region, will perform five inter-related functions, namely: research and information dissemination, training, advisory services, monitoring, and conducting pilot or demonstration projects.**

## Introduction

In their eagerness to develop as rapidly as possible Third World countries have placed their natural resources in serious jeopardy and caused their few big cities to have inhospitable and ugly environments. In this paper, we outline an approach to alleviate this dilemma by relying on a hitherto untapped local resource.

## Common Problems

The resource-rich countries in ASEAN and similar countries in the Tropical zone are faced with three serious environmental problems. These are:

- \* exhaustion and degradation of their terrestrial ecosystems;
- \* degradation of the coastal environment and its ecosystem; and
- \* environmental pollution due to industrial and urban wastes.

The rapid rate of depletion within the past three decades of the tropical forests in Kalimantan, the Philippines and Thailand in Southeast Asia and in the Amazon in South America illustrates the first problem. The widespread destruction of coral reefs in the Philippine archipelago due to massive soil erosion and illegal fishing methods illustrates the second problem. Finally, the high pollution loads of Hongkong Harbor, Manila Bay or Bay of Siam and similar bodies of waters opposite densely populated areas which render such water unsafe for swimming and as source of sea food illustrates the third problem.

But the most critical problem faced by these countries is the shortage of properly trained manpower to implement policies and programs on natural resource management and/or industrial pollution abatement. This problem is compounded by community apathy and unconcern.

## Ingredients for a Successful Environmental Protection Program

Experience elsewhere suggests that there are three basic ingredients leading to a successful environmental protection program, namely: political will, efficient organization and community support. Political will means personal commitment of the leaders of the party in power to the program through the adoption of a clear-cut policy and the provision of funds to carry out the program. Efficient organization means a corps of professionals imbued with the spirit of service and dedication to the program. Community support means key sectors of society and representatives of local governments, civic-groups, and most importantly, the media and educational sector, taking active interest and part in the national, regional and local components of the program.

## Environmental Education and the Development Process

By and large, the educational sector has not been made a full-fledged partner in environmental protection programs. This situation is traceable to a current gap in the understanding of the role the educational sector should play in the development process. There is a clear need to encourage close and effective collaboration between the educational institutions and environment agencies towards the goal of incorporating environmental education and training as an essential component of the development process.

It is our view that environmental education should permeate, that is, be integrated in almost all specialized fields of learning. In this context, we foresee a time when environmental theories and techniques are incorporated in agriculture, aqua-culture and fisheries, forestry, engineering, urban and regional planning, even economics, sociology, and other disciplines. In short, effective environmental education should be viewed as a component which pervades the entire fabric of education. The logical and happy result will be a close and effective collaboration between the educational sector and the environment agencies in pursuing environmental protection programs at all political and administrative levels.

## A Network of Regional Centres for Education and Training: A Suggested Strategy for a Decentralized EPM

Third World countries need not wait for the ideal approach to environmental education to be put in place. Meanwhile, educational institutions, particularly in higher education, may be harnessed to perform vital and essential functions on environmental protection programs in the regions where they are located.

These proposed regional centres for environmental education and training (RCEET) could become a potent national network for achieving an effective environmental protection program at minimum financial outlay but with extensive involvement from all sectors of the various communities in the entire country. We have no doubt that institutions of higher learning spread all over the country will accept this new role and challenging task.

Every RCEET will perform essentially five inter-related functions:

- \* *Research and Information Dissemination* - this will lead to the preparation and maintenance of a regional resource profile, identification of the main environmental problems and effective dissemination to community decision makers and leaders.
- \* *Training* - this will be a series of workshop and short-term training programs to assist government, NGO's, teachers and community leaders to gain an appreciation of environmental issues and problems peculiar to the region and to learn some ideas and ways of mitigating such problems.
- \* *Advisory Services* - this will lead to nurturing NGO's as allies in the region to exercise continuing concern for environmental conservation, education and awareness.
- \* *Monitoring* - this means establishing systems and procedures so that conservation practices are followed or acceptable pollution levels are maintained, that the eco-system is not unduly disrupted, and that the community health and environmental sanitation are enhanced.
- \* *Demonstration Projects* - this means conducting pilot or demonstration projects to mitigate or solve an environmental problem with appropriate technology utilizing indigenous resources.

**A Note on Implementation**

This proposed national network of RCEET's may be implemented by stages. To launch this strategy a policy conference may be convened by the highest political leaders of the country with heads of institutions of higher learning as principal participants together with sectoral representatives and from the media and the NGO's.