

Non-government Educational Activities in the Seto Inland Sea Area

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The U.N. Earth Summit in Rio 1992 made it clear that we are living in an era in which the Earth faces more critical environmental problems than ever before, and which, if we continue developing our industrial system as we are doing at present, will threaten the Earth's very fragile life-support systems.

Our group of concerned individuals formed to continue to study these issues.

We have found that for sustainable development and a sustainable society we need a good environmental education on a grassroots level.

We organized the first international Conference on a Sustainable Society in March '94, in Kobe.

The conference was held (1) to bring together other like-minded groups to talk and study (2) to listen to experts and concerned citizens on an equal level (3) to start an appeal to make "sustainable development" and "sustainable society" more commonly known in Japan.

From this, I would like to propose activities for citizens organizations for sustainable development and environmental education.

Environmental education by NGOs in Japan

There are extremely few NGO activities being carried out in the enclosed coastal seas of Japan which might be classified as environmental education. The reason is that environmental education is, as its name suggests, education. In other words, it is often thought of as falling within the province of the school system. Nevertheless, environmental education has long been an important NGO activity. NGOs have been involved in this type of activity since before the term "environmental education" was even coined.

It all began in about 1964 with a study movement carried out as a form of resistance against the activities of a petrochemical complex in the Suruga Bay Numazu-Mishima area. The participants in this movement put up carp streamers and shot off fireworks to determine wind direction, or the lack thereof, and their efforts did much to prevent pollution. After that, in the latter half of the 1960s, in such cases as the Minamata mercury poisoning incident in the Yatsushiro sea and the Yokkaichi asthma epidemic in the Ise Bay area, school teachers and other concerned citizens began to uncover and investigate pollution, and they carried out pollution education campaigns to protect the health of children.

In addition to pollution education, another form of education in the environmental field in Japan has been nature preservation education. Outdoor activities, which have been carried out principally by NGOs, increased rapidly beginning in the latter half of the 1960s, and have been aimed at cultivating firsthand outdoor experience, spreading knowledge about ecological systems, and teaching people to respect nature. Furthermore, the nature preservation education movement, expanding upon its initial focus on nature education, also began in the 1970s to emphasize such questions as how to preserve nature. The movement began to focus upon nature not just as a complex of ecological systems, but also as an important part of a healthy and pleasant living environment. The Koike Nature Society, in Tokyo's Ohta Ward on the edge of Tokyo Bay, acted at the time of the Ohi reclamation project to make this area the key focus of their own unique nature observation program. For one straight year, the society observed nature principally at the reclamation area, which was located at the seashore in the city center, but also in various suburban locations, including the seacoast, the mountains, and outlying communities. In addition to deepening understanding of nature, this program also included nature cleanup activities.

Since the 1970s, the consumers movement has given rise to various movements for checking to see that we do not impose a burden upon the environment in the course of our daily lives. For example, in the city of Ohtsu (on the edge of Lake Biwa), Shiga Prefecture, the Ohtsu

Consumer's Cooperative set up the Environmental Account Ledger Study Group, which was composed mainly of housewives. This group formulated a "Lifestyle Checklist" to help housewives evaluate their daily lives and make changes.

In spite of the aggressive efforts of NGOs, though, there is still a tendency to view environmental education as something to be carried out in the schools. Most environmental education activities reported by the Japan Society for Environmental Education are carried out either by educational institutions (especially schools) or local and prefectural governments. To be sure, environmental education in educational institutions is necessary and important, but school resources are stretched to the limit already with the current curriculum. While it is true that a life studies element was added to the curriculum of the lower grades in elementary schools in 1988, it has been extremely difficult to introduce more than a very limited amount of environmental education into the official school curriculum. Therefore, we expect to see an increasing need for NGOs to extend environmental education beyond the schools, targeting ordinary citizens.

In addition, in view of the adult education programs which are being established in response to the aging of society, there appears to be a need for NGOs to direct environmental education efforts towards society at large.

Activities of the Council for the Research of Sustainable Development & Sustainable Society

The Council for the Research of Sustainable Development & Sustainable Society, which is the parent organization of the People's Alliance for the Environmental Conservation of the Japanese Inland Sea Area, began organizing environmental study activities in the 1970s, in Kobe and since 1990 has been concentrating on researching the issue of sustainable development. This group organized relatively low-key study activities until 1993. Then, seeing a need to take its case more aggressively to the general public in order to build support for its positions, the Council organized the first International Conference on a Sustainable Society in 1994, in Kobe. It was held from March 19 to March 21 in Kobe's Hyogo Prefecture People's Hall.

This Conference was held to achieve the following three objectives:

- (1) To create links with various grassroots movements

There are many NGOs in Japan working to achieve sustainable development, but they are very diverse in terms of size, organization, and the types of activities carried out, and they all operate independently. Rather than just facilitate the exchange of information, our most important objective was to get these NGOs to act in concert in carrying out their activities.

- (2) To incorporate local conditions into environmental education

Borrowing upon local conditions for the sake of environmental education has been done for a long time. The previously mentioned Koike Nature Society is one example of a locally based study project. Tokyo's Shinobazu Nature Observation Club is another, and there are many others, too. One reason we chose Kobe for the first Conference was to acquaint Conference participants with the current condition of the Seto Inland Sea.

- (3) To bring researchers and average citizens together at the same table for discussion and study

NGO gatherings and conferences in Japan have always tended to gather together either researchers or average citizens, but not both. Exchange between these two groups, to the slight extent it has occurred, has only involved a small number of researchers invited to give speeches at public gatherings. At our Conference, however, we brought together people who have been victims of pollution, average citizens (including persons with a connection to farming or the fishing industry), and researchers. One purpose in doing this was to enable average citizens to gain a deeper understanding of environmental issues, and another purpose was to help researchers discover points which they have previously ignored.

A critical look at environmental education at the Conference

Environmental educational events at the Conference took the form of workshops, but much to our regret, the results of these workshops did not go beyond proposals, so we have only

moved one small step forward from the usual symposium. We still are faced with two tasks: 1) to carry out a conference in such a way that participants can learn by doing; and 2) to create a mechanism which will enable the results of a conference to be reflected in the process of community development. In the future, we need to consider other types of activities, such as sending request forms to related parties.

Points to keep in mind regarding NGO environmental education

Although NGO environmental education activities carried out thus far have been of a wide variety, they have also been small in scope and incomplete.

We can achieve precious little by attempting to get environmental education introduced into the relevant portions of school curricula, and since most adult education is carried out by government organizations, only a very limited range of subjects can be addressed by non-educational institutions. Furthermore, other organizations, from which somewhat better results might be expected, have recently made environmental education an end in itself. In other words, rather than carrying out environmental education as a means of achieving community development, there have been cases in which environmental education has been carried out "for the sake of carrying out environmental education." This kind of environmental education, which is narrow and lacks a clear focus, could easily stray in important ways from its real purpose. In carrying out NGO environmental education on sustainable development, we must be keep in mind that we are trying to use the NGO movement to promote learning.

While we must maintain a distinction between the environmental preservation movement and environmental education, the fact remains that activities aimed at mere dissemination of information and knowledge cannot be considered environmental education. There must be a concomitant effort resolve existing problems. The essence of the NGO movement is a desire to find some sort of resolution for current problems. To resolve existing environmental problems, it is of course necessary to study about the physics and chemistry of nature, and about biology. In addition, however, we must also understand the importance of nature to human society. We must carry out publicity campaigns, educate ourselves about legal issues, and work to build consensus and solve problems in a world where people hold widely varying political and social values. In the course of these efforts, people will gradually open their eyes to issues regarding nature, society, and human beings. The NGO movement has put the environmental issue on the public agenda, and has been working to change and create values in an effort to find solutions. I believe that the NGO movement itself is the greatest form of environmental education at our disposal.

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