

FRAGILE ENVIRONMENTS, ROBUST SOLUTIONS

Neil Taylor

The need for effective environmental education in the South Pacific Region is clear. Some of the most unique and fragile environments in the world exist here and they are coming under increasing pressure, as populations grow and limited resources are exploited in an unsustainable way. This has resulted in an ever increasing list of environmental problems including deforestation and soil erosion, depletion of marine resources, the destruction of mangroves, and the indiscriminate use of pesticides.

Good environmental education is one means of combatting this degradation and it can be delivered through the formal education system which is directed at students in the classroom, and through non formal education which is directed at the community as a whole. Formal environmental education can be a subject in its own right as in Kiribati or it may be integrated throughout the whole curriculum as in Fiji. There has been considerable debate amongst educationists as to which mode is most effective. Whichever structure is used to deliver environmental education, of more importance is the style of teaching employed.

According to Atchia, "learning by doing" is the key to good environmental education, for although this method may leave some gaps in formal knowledge it has the very great advantage that what is experienced by the learner is truly acquired.¹ Arguably, a child who learns to plant trees and care for them as they grow will be less likely to become a destructive deforester. Similarly, teaching about overpopulation in a personal, sensory way can give children an understanding of what overpopulation means. By

temporarily doubling or tripling the population of a classroom, children can actually experience the pressures that overpopulation creates.

However, all too often pupils learn about the environment in remote ways without being given the opportunity to leave the classroom and make their own observations. This type of learning is unlikely to develop the sort of appreciation of the environment which ultimately will be expressed in a caring attitude.

A number of organisations are working to improve environmental education in the region particularly through the provision of resource materials, so lacking in many areas, in combination with in-service training. In the past, resources have often been produced on an ad hoc basis without proper reference to or links with the existing curriculum. Fortunately this situation has changed and the South Pacific Regional Environmental Programme is currently reviewing the curriculum in a number of regional countries. In conjunction with the Institute of Education, it is executing a programme to provide pupil's books and teacher's guides in environmental studies for all primary schools in Kiribati. In Fiji, The South Pacific Action Committee for Human Ecology and The Environment (SPACHEE) has recently initiated a project to develop an environmental text for the primary sector. It is to be hoped that the provision of new resource materials will act as a stimulus to teachers and result in effective and relevant environmental education for many more young people.

REFERENCE

1. Atchia, M. 1988, *A Case for Developing a Primary Environmental Science Curriculum adapted to the Needs of the South Pacific States*. Report of Environmental Education Curriculum. Workshop, Suva, 7th - 14 July.