

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN MODERN SOCIETY

Professor Jaanus Kiili

Tallinn Teachers Training Institute
Estonia

Education always has a basis. During the last centuries, the basis was religious dogma or, comparably, ideological customs and traditions or, especially in recent times, rational thinking. In spite of the difference in basis, the aim of education has always been the introduction and the propagation of certain ideas or opinions and the preservation of social values and trends in the socio-economical evolution of a certain society.

In Europe, there exists an original ethnic community where the number and socio-political role of different nations has essentially changed during the last 40 years. At the same time, all of the European peoples have their own relations to environmental problems, their own world views.

Nation is a form of existence for the species *Homo sapiens*. Conventionally, we can distinguish two types of nations. First, there are existential nations characterized by specialization, a concrete ecological niche, fixed inhabited territory, a field of activity and a relatively slow increase of their number. They are K-strategists and under stable conditions existential nations reach a balanced socio-cultural position. Then, there are also successive nations with extensive reproduction and rapid economical-political-cultural expansion.

Analyzing the relations between two great nations, we can find not only the elements of both rivalry and competition in economics but also in culture, sport and other spheres of human activity. The relation between today's great authoritative nation and yesterday's powerful nation are more complicated: the 'losers' never want to acknowledge their decline and degeneration—that is, the decrease of their socio-economical, political and cultural role in the world. The relations between the great and small nations depend on the psychological values of the great nation: there are nations with a "holy mission" to bring their culture to the small nations and force small nations to accept their culture. But the result of such 'support' is often very dismal—the culture of the 'supporting nation' is not accepted and the native culture of the small nation will be destroyed too. Here and there, some great nations favor and support the natural tendencies in the development of the native culture—science, education, etc. of other nations.

The relations among small nations also include the elements of both competition and cooperation and symbiosis. In the first case, there is a peaceful competition whose science-culture-sport is better, more successful or more authoritative in a concrete geographical region. Relations such as cooperation will be primarily expressed in competition and struggle with a great nation who, as a result of history, will be described as an 'enemy nation'.

All these questions like the comparative analysis of population growth, interactions in multinational groups (societies), and attitudes of different human groups to the environmental problems are within the competence of human ecology. Between nations living together side by side, there are always certain economical and political relations. As a result, the political ethnoecology must be the first natural part of the environmental education program.

Man is a result of biological and cultural evolution. The rate of cultural development varies with different nations. Therefore, world vision and treatment differ in human groups, nations and societies. Furthermore, social and cultural development is a spontaneously accelerating process—nations and societies with slower evolution will fall behind the advanced nations and societies ever more quickly resulting in the deepening of the differentiation of human societies.

Our relation to nature is not limited to its admiration and protection. We have continuously been living, working and building in nature. For this reason, it is almost impossible today to find land with untouched nature. That is why the environmental education program should also include the history of culture, and of the local cultural heritage—how the environment is expressed in art and literature, how the local building and clothing style is formed, what the main cultural influences are, and who the culture mediators were and are. All of these questions will form the second part of the environmental education program.

Man lives in towns or in the countryside, in lodgings or in private houses. All the building and different settling principles form the territorial structure of a human community. Do the recent buildings and principles of living-space organization answer the environmental, psychological demands of people; how do we design our living spaces, apartments, and working places? All these problems of environmental psychology must also be included as the third component of the program of environmental education.

What is the ethical basis for modern environmental education? Is it impossible to relate to historical experiences considering that current problems, including those connected with the environment, are the result of processes carried out during the last decades. At the same time, societies with different stages of socioeconomic development acknowledge environmental problems differently. In human communities with a

low ecological level, life is based primarily on economical utility and expediency: we have enough natural resources and that situation continues endlessly, at least during our lifetime. Naturally, the ethical norms in such a society can fix the norms only for the relations among people and perhaps later, between the society and individuals, as well. In democratic societies, much attention will be given to individual rights and duties, to the freedom of an individual. In totalitarian societies, life -environmental philosophy and ethics is subordinated to the state - all the permitted human activities are for the protection and propagation of one dominating ideology.

Up to the present time, there are no active ethical norms regulating the relations between people, society and environment. Ordinarily there are no real commitments to our environment; long-term restoration programs are not at our disposal. Nevertheless, it is understandable that the society which lacks a normal relation to its natural environment lives without future prospects. Therefore, the widespread propagation of new environmental ethics regulating the relations between nature and society is also a third component in the cultural and ethical evolution of the industrial society, a key for the further development of humankind.

Professor **Jaanus Kiili** is Assistant Professor in the Tallinn Teachers Training Institute. He graduated cum laude from the Faculty of Biology of Tartu University in 1981, where he was a research scientist at the Department of Zoology. He took his Ph.D. in animal ecology from the Institute of Evolutionary Morphology and Ecology of Animals, Soviet Academy of Sciences, in 1990. He has written on animal ecology, environmental education, and the history and philosophy of biology and ecology.