

RAISING ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS THROUGH EDUCATION

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The main goal of Biopolitics International Organisation, as well as the main theme of the present International Sakharov Festival, is to promote respect and appreciation for the bio-environment. In other words, to generate environmental awareness in the public, at large, as well as the world's decision-makers. When talking or writing about the environment, we have to keep in mind that it is the bio environment, which is the life-supporting base for humanity and we must respect it in all its complexity. We must also begin to acknowledge that the bio-environment is not restricted to the human species but pertains to all forms of life, all the living organisms with which we share this planet.

After forty years of work in nature conservation at local, national and broad international levels, I have been led to believe that, to a considerable extent, we are entitled to be anthropocentric in our approach. Indeed, we should be anthropocentric, since people are here with their needs and with their basic existential, as well as their spiritual problems. To ignore those needs would not be a humane approach. What we are not allowed to be is anthropo-egoistic. To coexist in harmony, with all forms of life, means to use natural resources in a sustainable way.

The anthropocentric position of humans, as indicated above, not only entails the right of people to use, sustainably of course, the natural - particularly the living - resources; it also entails the human responsibility for the state of the bio-environment, for the survival and welfare of millions of biological species, for their biotopes, for healthy living and life-supporting systems.

The Sakharov Festival is looking for pathways to an international bio-culture in the next millennium. Bio-culture can mean different things to different groups of people. Technically, under bio-culture, the technologies of growing plants and breeding animals are understood. The bio-culture we have in mind here, however, means a full integration of the bio-environment - of biodiversity - into the human culture at large.

This year, for example, we have started, under the leading initiative of the British Plantlife charity, the project entitled Planta Europa to strengthen plans for the protection and sustainable use of European wild flora. A pan-European Conference will be held next May in France under the sponsorship of the French Environment Ministry, and manuals on the subject will be elaborated, published and their guidelines implemented, while appropriate networks and structures are developed to carry out the task. One of the project themes includes the analysis of how plants are involved in our culture, whether in food and drinks or in art. On the other hand, we are fully entitled to request from our culture more attention to biodiversity, and not only the recognition of its intrinsic values, starting from simple resource consumption and ranging as far as spiritual inspiration. To put it in very simply, someone would be considered as a cultural ignoramus who mistook Gothic for Baroque architecture, but no one would blame a novelist for confusing an oak with a beech tree.

Biodiversity, the totality of all living things and systems on Earth, particularly as IUCN - the World Conservation Union - promotes it, its conservation and wise, sustainable use, is divided into three dimensions: the genetic, the taxonomic and the ecosystemic. More and more a fourth dimension is emerging: the cultural dimension of biodiversity. This last component not only includes humanity's monuments and structures in the bio-environment; it also relates to all relations between humans, their culture, and other forms of life: the traditional as well as modern methods of farming, forest management and other uses of living natural resources. Humans themselves are an integral part of biodiversity, and their culture is, after all, also a part of the planet's bios. Such a perception of bio-diversity provides an important link, even a prerequisite, for the building of bio-culture in the next millennium.

These few ideas and comments are necessary before coming to the main subject of this presentation, which is the role of education in achieving environmental awareness throughout the world population. As emphasised above, environmental awareness is a key factor in order to achieve the wished-for new bio-culture in the next millennium.

There are, of course, different forms and different images of environmental awareness. We often take it for granted that environmental awareness is a positive element in our struggle for a better environment. However, this is not always necessarily the case. All over the world the media are devoting more and more attention and space to ecological and environmental matters and events. I am sorry to say that in their search for the sensational issues so popular in our consumer society, publicity is often given to less important, marginal or even extremist issues, resulting in the erroneous image of environmentalists as unrealistic fools who are trying to install some totalitarian, environmental dictatorship. Much depends on the right choice of issues and their presentation in order for people not be misinformed, discouraged or annoyed about environmental matters. Rather, they should be made interested, positively inclined, environmentally minded, co-operative and, finally, involved.

At the famous Biosphere Conference convened by UNESCO in Paris (1968), the basic outline was formulated at an international level, for a new branch of education - environmental education - using all the local, national and international experience and expertise in the field available then. Enough time has passed since then to allow for some interim evaluation. This is not the place to repeat the basic concept and guiding principles of environmental education which can easily be found in the many reports, recommendations and books published since then. I would pose the following two provocative questions:

- Has the ongoing process of environmental education brought about the expected results?
- If not, what are the roots of the problem and what future improvements are needed?

Environmental education is a continuous life-long system of information, publicity, education and training. It also involves public relations, which must be very carefully and tactfully adjusted to given circumstances, geographical, social and economic conditions, audience, existing educational and public relations systems, and, finally, to political situations. To answer the questions raised above:

- The up-to-date process of environmental education is developing, but it has not yet resulted in its expected final goal, which is a general change of attitude and practice toward the environment.
- The reason for some apparent failures in environmental education lies, apart from some shortcomings in the process of its execution and the support which is still lacking mainly from the governmental side, in the first place in the abstract character of education itself. Education, in this direction, still has a mainly abstract appeal. What is necessary is to get the process of education also supported by some economic stimulation. A big problem in European national parks and protected areas, for example, is the fact that the conservationists and park managers have so far failed to persuade local populations, communities and their decision-makers of the benefits of having protected areas. To change the situation is one of the main goals behind the launching of a new international Action Plan for Protected Areas in Europe called Parks for the People, under the leadership of the IUCN and the WWF. From the above two items some necessary improvements will already be derived: better forms and methods of environmental education, more support from governments, as well as the private sector, economic incentives for groups and individuals acting in an appropriate way, and a substantially improved public relations sector. We should not forget that in raising environmental awareness, people - and the most desirable target groups, the decision-makers - usually dislike being told that they are going to be educated. They want to be informed, to discuss problems and consider solutions, where often a viable solution is not a conflict of extremes, but rather a compromise acceptable to both sides.

Environmental education is crucial and an irreplaceable element which should be developed. Even if it cannot change the world immediately, it has an important role to play. We are living in a world where two dangerous trends are developing and threatening not only the environment, but even the future well-being of the human society: economic recession as an economic factor and individualisation within the society, as a social factor. They both present a threat to the future development of human culture, bio-culture included. We have to face them and fight them, through environmental education, through formulating a healthy environmental awareness, and through launching a new bio-culture for the next millennium. It is one of the greatest contemporary challenges for humanity.

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