

## An Inner City Duck Story

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If we are serious about community environmental participation, let's consider this key performance indicator: by what age should all children in Britain have seen a duck?

Recently, I was visiting the project officer of a nature study centre in an inner city park. The sun was shining and birdsong was in the air. When my meeting came to an end, I went out of the office into the midst of a group of wildly excited nine-year-olds on a school visit, many of them from ethnic minority groups. I talked to the class teacher and discovered that the reason for the excitement was the presence of two ducks on the pond. Most of the children had never seen a live duck. In fact, many of them had never been to the park before, although they lived within easy walking distance. Fears about child abuse have meant that parents or carers will not let them roam freely. A trip to the park is a special treat.

This is the story of many inner-city children, who live in some of the worst environments, and whose lives have no respite from deprivation. Deprivation does not always stem from lack of amenities and programmes of activities but from access to them. I define deprivation in aesthetic as well as material terms. It is a lack of access to the variety and beauty of life, which others might take for granted.

The excitement these children show on encountering a real duck shows the surge of emotion that can run through us all when we have the opportunity to have real contact with nature.

For environmental education to acquire meaning it has to be more than mere 'book learning' and pious declarations about saving the planet. It has to be about practical engagement with the natural world. Its purpose should be to remove the artificial barriers between humanity and the rest of nature, so that contact with nature can become routine for all.

And surely we should regard contact with nature as our birthright. For disadvantaged social groups especially, environmental and social justice issues are as one. Environmental participation should be seen as part of the democratic process, not a mere optional extra. Citizenship is about creating opportunities for individuals from all backgrounds to participate in a cycle of experience, so that they may reach their full potential as human beings. In this sense, the 'right' to contact with nature is at least as important as the 'right' to go to school and pass exams.

In Britain, and the West in general, the word 'environment' is associated with a peacetime vision of bucolic pastures and the protection of wildlife amid a world of plenty. This vision is heavily coloured by the myth of 'nature' untouched by - and hence separation from - human beings. Wildlife and nature preservation and conservation are of paramount importance. However, the context for environmental participation is much wider. Environmental participation requires political (and economic) decentralisation, so the needs of local communities and their environments can be addressed too. This has cultural implications; multiculturalism should encompass biodiversity as much as human cultural diversity.

My encounter with the nine-year-olds illustrates the depth and complexity of the task before us, if we are to extend to disadvantaged communities the basic right to:

- contact with nature,
- the enjoyment and use of the environment,
- information and understanding of the environment,
- the acquisition of skills that make a practical contribution to the environment

Society cannot be truly inclusive until it is ecologically sustainable. Tackling social exclusion, therefore, involves addressing the problems of aesthetic deprivation and lack of access to the natural world, along with economic deprivation, educational disadvantage and the emotional dislocation caused by family and community breakdown. A denatured environment is also a dehumanised environment, in which full citizenship and full human rights are denied. Environmental deprivation is a form of captivity, which has a distorting effect on human behaviour. It exacerbates the problems already experienced by the disadvantaged, making human relationships dysfunctional and contributing to the spread of anti-social behaviour, mental illness and a wider sense of alienation, from both nature and society. Crime, drugs and child abuse fill an ecological, as well as emotional and moral void.

One of the main purposes of environmental campaigning should therefore be to 'give nature back' to disadvantaged communities, including - but not exclusively - the ethnic minorities. The issue of environmental exclusion has been overlooked for too long by too many environmental activists, and by too many environmental agencies and organisations. Environmental groups would do well to examine their internal cultures, asking themselves whether they are sending out a positive enough message to disadvantaged urban populations. For too many, 'Green' still means 'white' and environmental issues are associated with suburban privilege. A more inclusive environmental movement, in which all individuals are valued, would ultimately have more political clout. It would be a more truly ecological movement too, and would gain much in wisdom and insight.

The plight of the children in the part should concern all environmental campaigners. There should not even be five-year-olds who have never seen a duck.

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