

Involving Urban Communities in the Environment

We all need to be caught up in believing in a possible better future. This can only happen if we can ensure the future of our only home - planet earth. It is a huge job. We need mass participation for it to become real. At present, there is a rising wave of belief within the environmental movement that we must involve people in environmental action. In Britain itself, 80% of the population now live in urban areas. Statistically only 10% of the population are either involved in practical environmental work, or informed enough to take appropriate action in how they live their own lives. How can we successfully care for the environment with only 10% trying to put things right while the other 90% are not taking responsibility for the damage they are doing? It is a hopeless race against time. Community participation is a major issue for the environmental movement.

In order to initiate community action, the community has to be motivated by feeling that environmental concerns are relevant to them, that they are affected at the centre of their lives, and happen where they are.

Everyone concerned with the environment therefore has to address what we understand as the continuity of the concept of environment working right through urban and rural areas. We need to re-define environment in a way that constantly establishes and re-establishes the inextricable relationship of people and nature. In community participation in the environment, what we want in the end is that personal aims and environmental aims are seen to merge. Beyond that, socio-environmental aims at a personal level must coincide with local community aims, and then coincide with regional aims, national aims and finally global aims. That is the ultimate expression and conclusion of the whole local/global theme that is being discussed at the moment.

The recent environmental movement has run away with the word environment. It is too pure green, to the extent that most people feel it is something extra to their lives. They feel that only certain people take a special interest, that it is not about them. The definition of environment has to be brought back to its original integrated meaning. It is everything around us, affecting the immediate quality of our lives. We need to believe in and make popular a concept of environment that powerfully speaks of the effect of how we live, not only in relation to the natural environment, but directly to how we all end up having to live.

In Britain, many people feel that environmentalists believe that wildlife is much more important than people. There seems to be the implication that there is a superior group of good and educated people who care about animals and plants, and the rest are bad and ignorant people who destroy. In Britain participation in the care of the environment is dominated by the white middle class. The class system has bred a tradition in which the middle class has the privilege of concern. People who have money and cars can live in the urban areas, and still be in contact with the marvellous beauty of nature, to go away on weekends to walk and to ride their horses in the countryside. Their immediate environment in the city is a nice clean house, often with a pretty garden. They tend to work in offices all week, and find leaving their immediate environment, which is in order, to do good to the wider environment, for example digging or coppicing in the woods with the nature conservation organisations, to be a leisure pursuit. It keeps you fit. But, what is the experience of contact with nature of the urban working classes? If you live in a high rise council estate, in which the walls are damp and nothing is done. There is no garden. The local authority fills the flowerbeds with so-called vandal-proof plants covered in hard leaves and thorns so that if you were a little child you would think plants are truly wildlife in the attacking sense. Your front door opens onto a hostile concrete landscape of crime, unemployment, poverty, litter and human despair. Then does it make sense for one to leave one's rotten immediate environment to do good to some place further afield, or indeed imagine why an environmental organisation should bother to come and ask you to consider going out to help to take care of a place which you never got to to enjoy? Why should you care about something that is not part of your life? And if your job is to dig in the roads all week would you feel that it is fun and exercise to go and dig again at the weekend?

The middle class has done some very valuable work indeed, but we must increase the range of projects so that they express the interest and needs of the different ways of life of many non-participating groups. For the urban working classes, the betterment of the immediate environment should be high on the agenda, yet this potentially dynamic situation for participation is undermined by the fact that many environmental organisations do not see the significance of the urban environment clearly in the continuity of the concept of environment.

Incorporation of natural elements in urban environmental projects forms a basis for contact and involvement with the natural environment. Urban groups also need the enjoyment and inspiration of programmes of trips to the countryside which link up with and give meaning to the natural elements in the urban landscape. They too can take care of the countryside, but need a different programme of

enablement to do it. They need a setting in which they too own the natural environment because it is part of their lives.

For the environmental movement, it is a basic question to ask 'Why should anyone imagine themselves being asked to be interested in something they are never in touch with?' If we have the privilege of contact with nature, through the enjoyment of nature, we will come to love nature, and what follows is that we tend to take care of what we love. If we find that what we love is going to be destroyed, we will come out fighting for it. Lack of contact with nature in urban areas, and other barriers to the right of enjoyment of aspects of nature is a basic issue for an environmental movement that wishes to release the huge missing contribution of local urban communities. Links must be built within the urban environment to enable contact with nature, both symbolically and concretely in the quality of its spaces.

At this point I would like in particular to comment on the present social reputation of the high rise blocks in modern architecture. A lot of social ills are being blamed on the high rise building, but the original concept of the high rise block has been lost. The major aim was to provide high quality living spaces, seeing the block itself as a community, with community facilities built in at intervals into the block itself. The high rise block was to be a device to free the land, so that people may have wide open spaces in areas of high population. However, other factors came into play. Lack of committed planning has left us with high rise buildings with practically no land in between. In Britain, lack of housing meant that a social balance was lost. First of all, only the poorer classes are housed in council estates. On top of that came a well meant priority system in which people with problems were housed first, giving such estates higher and higher proportions of people in trouble within their lives. The consequence is that such areas house progressively more and more unbalanced communities in which people with problems cannot be absorbed into the support of a majority stable population. Fear has given birth to local cultures in which coming home is about running through the deserted unsafe linking spaces of such areas in order to slam the front door and shut out the world.

Think of this picture in contrast to equally highly populated prestige riverfront properties along the River Thames - similar high rise blocks but full of contented people who do not think of their flats as prisons or as part of their life problem. They have stable and privileged neighbours. With no estate gardens, they nevertheless feel free and mobile. They can get into their cars and go wherever they want. They are safe behind their electronic gates. Is high rise a problem, or is social organisation, resources, and the socio-environmental landscape the problem?

More and more we have to think of re-integrating ourselves into a way of seeing all our apparently different fields of work as playing a part in creating a socio-environmental situation that determines the quality of life of people. Environmental equality and social equality go hand in hand. Environmental quality and life quality go hand in hand. Opportunity for enjoyment and opportunity for involvement in environmental care by all go hand in hand. What we do and how we do it, what we build and how we design it shout out messages. If we never consult people as to what they want and allow the linking spaces of local environments to be harsh and cold, we are telling the people who live there 'You do not matter. You are the debris of society.' If we build open public spaces which are pleasant and green, with element of water or murals showing wildlife, we are saying to people 'You matter'. 'Nature is beautiful and you are part of it.' If we build in elements, for example sculptures giving symbolic presence to animals, or simply choose our external and internal building materials carefully, providing continuity with nature, and reinforce these with a programme of access to the greater countryside or nature reserves, we are then sending out the message, 'Urban and rural life is related. You own the beautiful countryside, and within the urban spaces we are ensuring as best we can that you can feel the continuity of nature in cities.' Nature is marvellous. I have not met anyone whose life has not been enhanced through contact with it. We simply need people to be inspired by the wonder of it to want a continuing relationship with it. Especially here in Africa. How can you fail? In England we have to inspire people with dormice and squirrels, here you have the magnificence of herds of elephants seen against blazing sunsets. We work surrounded by technology, and go home to washing machines and televisions but guess where we all want to go on holiday to spend our hard earned money? In the main we seek out nature. Nature is our dream of paradise!

In our present drive towards motivating community action we are acknowledging that we are the conscious creature within nature that can interpret it as such, and take and plan wilful action to either care for or neglect nature. We are the ones who can be inspired to use our power to enable ourselves to benefit from it or allow ourselves to be deprived of it. The relationship of people to nature is paramount in the care of the environment.

Going on from the importance of the provision of contact with nature, (which establishes the love for nature followed by the motivation to care for what they love), people need to feel that they are cared about by organisations with environmental concerns - at the moment the front line taking responsibility to create a climate in which participation can take place. People who feel cared for become caring. Beyond working

for a living, we all engage in other activities for two reasons. One - for enjoyment, because it is fun. Secondly - because it has meaning. There is no more effective way to introduce contact with nature and to come into contact with the community than through the joint planning of a fun event with a local community. It must be done in the spirit of fun and sharing knowledge and concerns, building trust and unity.

There is a lot of groundwork to be done in establishing contact and building a caring atmosphere in which the environmental organisation sees itself as part of the community, taking on the work that is basically about community development. People are not automatically consultable. They need to gain skills to begin to be consultable. Over and over again, public consultation meetings fail because no-one will face up to the fact that the population is not automatically consultable. It is quite a skill to interpret one's own circumstances and identify problems, speak up in public and say how one wants to approach these problems. By allowing the community to own and do small projects of their own and being there to be called upon to provide expertise and information is a very good beginning. Community groups, through doing small projects can begin to learn the basics of project planning, budgeting, problem solving, teamwork, taking on the assessment of a situation and establishing their first aims.

Within organisations there is much internal work to be done. There must be an increasing awareness of doing away with inflexible work practices which militate against progressive change. Simply having a policy and structures which incorporate socio-environmental progress is a good beginning but it is not enough. Staff training and staff development is crucial. The effectiveness of the organisation can only be measured through the extent of self development of every member of its staff. It is only through the awareness, creativity and ability of the individual staff members of any organisation that policy can be enacted and real progress is made in the building up of a working relationship with local people. How the organisation's individual personnel see the world, how they interpret and re-interpret the nature of their work through the impact of becoming part of the local community they wish to involve then comes back into the evolution of policy and structure, thereby determining the growing relevance of their organisation. The willingness of an organisation to change ways of working, see itself as part of a community, and allow power sharing at every level are essential to success.

The keyword to community involvement is 'Transformation'. A vision needs to be built in which both the community and the organisation jointly own the vision, with the organisation seeing itself as having become part of a newly integrated community. The sustainability of community action lies in the success of the organisation having become and remaining part of this new integrated community. The organisation often has to come to terms with power sharing in joint decision making. In the process, no doubt the organisation will come into contact with other fields such as health, social services, education, the arts and so on. This is the point at which a very important process is well on the way. It will have to come to terms with being insecure, working within other fields in which it has no specialist knowledge. This is the quality of equal partnership. It is a frame of mind which relishes the challenge of not fully knowing, taking the risk and insecurity of partnership within the reality of power sharing in joint decision making. It is the never ending process of seeking out one's role in a very big picture.

As people have been pushed increasingly in the complex modern world of endless established knowledge into narrow specialised fields, we often mistakenly think we know the answers as long as we stay within the boundaries of our own field. We forget that everything we do is ultimately about people and for people in the wide world. It has become an extraordinary skill to be able to work in an integrated way, focussed within certain boundaries or aims while set in the context of a very large picture. Yet when one gets over being overwhelmed (which is a necessary stage of development) one comes to see that it is only by being able to hold the big picture in one's mind that one becomes optimistic. A lot of modern despair is due to having to do one's best within an understanding that is narrow so that one can never see the effect of one's role feeding into an overall aim, a vision that holds all of us. Or, confined to having influence only within one's own field, one feels powerless when one recognises destructive elements happening within another field, destroying or wearing away the work in which one is actually engaged. Seeing the big picture, identifying one's small role, allows one's work to be seen in context, no matter how small. It becomes meaningful, progressive and worthwhile. One becomes part of a communal effort where we are dependent on each other. They way we are pushed to isolate our work, so that it becomes independent and creates the illusion that it is under our full control, makes us lose control of the whole. Equal partnership is about listening and learning, and knowing when to take a back seat and allow others to lead with their strengths, and when it is appropriate to lead with one's own strength. It is an exciting process of mutual transformation. One feels engaged in a different kind of unified power to shape our lives.

It would be the wrong conclusion if we feel that we are moving towards community action because we need the community. Because then it is about acquiring a workforce of only at certain times for our agenda, which we illusionally see are paramount within our own field, reaffirmed everyday by those within our own circles. We can so easily convince ourselves that we are the only ones who know about the nature of the problem, because we are never challenged by the outer world by not choosing to involve

ourselves with those who may not see life in our way at all, isolated, we feel what we think is good is naturally good for everyone.

Rather, it is about re-integrating ourselves within a vision in which we enter the big picture, are challenged at every turn to re-examine our concerns and make them relevant, moving together, seeking our role in which to contribute, and there cohesively working for a common aim. The measure of success, I would like to reiterate is that ultimately our personal aims coincide with local community aims, and then coincide with regional aims, national aims, and global aims. This is something that environmentalist should find easy to take on, because in nature it has been so clearly demonstrated that everything impacts on every other life form right across the earth. Pollution blows across continents. When it rains in England, it is actually the Atlantic Ocean falling on us. The sun, shining on us this morning in South Africa has shone on every living thing on this earth within the last 24 hours, making things grow.

What an enormous amount of emotion, hope, excitement and energy there is to be released from both organisations and people! Within the environment movement there can be no boundaries - it is the world, and bound up with that people. We have no choice in the urgent matter of environmental care. We must work to release all the energies of local efforts into the environment, tuned into the big picture to become a global effort, working together for our one world. And as greater and greater numbers of people are drawn into urban areas, anyone concerned with the environment must take on the task to make their work relevant to the powerhouse that is people, set in an urban environment that is conceptually part of the whole.

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