

The Cycle of Participation

Because of the thrust of the environmental movement for community involvement in nature conservation, the popular definition of environmental participation is practical contribution to the environment. Participation includes the enjoyment of nature, being informed and having an opinion about nature alongside making a contribution. It is often pointed out that environmental participation is in the main the domain of the white middle classes, as if they have in some way sought to make this so. With the growing interest to include other social groups it is important to understand why the white middle classes have come to be such significant contributors to environmental care.

BEN has uncovered what it calls the cycle of participation. All the elements of this cycle is embedded in the white middle class life style. Most of them have gardens, so that children grow up having the opportunity to mess around with soil and plants. At weekends, it is usual to drive out into the countryside for picnics and walks. In other words, being in contact with nature is part of their lives. If one is in contact with nature and enjoys and appreciates the beauty and the wonders of nature, one naturally grows to love it. If then, one is informed that what one loves is threatened, it is a natural human response to come out fighting for it. In such a scenario environmental participation is a natural phenomenon in white middle class life.

For many deprived groups, it is therefore important to recognise that the process is missing because the crucial first step - contact with nature and enjoyment of nature - is not in place.

If we wish to release the vast missing contribution of ethnic groups and other disadvantaged groups, the environmental movement needs to recognise the essential groundwork of putting into place access to contact with nature in the immediate environment of such groups, and enable access to nature at large further afield.

Contact with Nature/Enjoyment

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Enjoyment leads to love of Nature

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When we then come to know that nature
is threatened or needs our care in some way,
the normal human response is that we wish
to take care of what we love,
so we end up contributing to Nature

Many ethnic communities live in some of the worst inner city environments. Enabling contact with nature will not only take them on to the road of joining the mainstream environmental movement, it will directly impact on their quality of life.

People who work within the environmental arena have shown themselves to be people of goodwill with respect to ethnic groups. The sphere within which they work is one which proposes the concept of wholeness and is therefore open to the concepts of multi-culturalism and social inclusion. The positive activities that are part and parcel of the environmental movement are potentially a vital force in the integration and empowerment of ethnic communities. As a framework of participation the environmental movement can provide much that would strengthen vulnerable groups :

- the opportunity to enter a supportive framework
- exposure to a widened range of roles and values which assist self-determination
- exposure to a widened range of stimulation
- opportunities to participate in activities which enhance the quality of life
- opportunities to engage in activities which give direct control over aspects of one's life and immediate surroundings
- the availability of guidance

With senior level commitment towards social inclusion coupled with training for the staff and project officers of environmental organisations, the environmental movement is well poised to contribute to a sea change in the building of a socially cohesive society.