

The State of the Nation: Environmental Education/Education for Sustainability

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1. Introduction

In this paper I will comment on what I consider to be some of the more significant contextual implications of the state of Environmental Education (EE)/Education for Sustainability (EfS) in Australia, from the perspective of President of the Australian Association for Environmental Education (AAEE). In providing a summary of the current state of play, I will present a life-stage analysis for EE/EfS, delineate some achievements, identify some limitations and set some strategic challenges for our future in EE/EfS.

First of all, what right does AAEE have to present a 'State of the Nation' report on EE/EfS? In my view we have every right if we are indeed the peak professional association within our sector, every right if we strive to represent the views of a broad cross-section of our profession, including practitioners on the ground, researchers, policy-makers and so on. And we have every right if we are, in fact, independent and fearless in our views and hold clearly the right to express them openly yet with sensitivity. For the Association I represent that is the starting position for this presentation. I wish to establish what I maintain is our context with the following quote:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deep fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light not our darkness that frightens us.
(Williamson, 1992, p. 190)

In presenting this report I have drawn on a range of sources and experiences, including:

- the combined wisdom of, and input from, informants from the Council and the Executive of AAEE.
- significant EE/EfS interaction at AAEE events with many kinds of people in a wide variety of places, including social events with family and friends and thirty years of professional work in both environmental education and social change education.
- my awareness of the perspectives of a range people involved in projects and activities and with whom I have worked in my private consultancy capacity. This work has provided opportunities to collaborate with educators in government, non-government and industry sectors from several parts of Australia.
- the perspectives, as I saw them, of many people I have worked with on projects and activities in my previous role as Director, Industry and Community Education in the NSW Environment Protection Authority.
- a number of key reference documents listed at the end of this paper.

2. Life-stage analysis for EE

In reality we have not had a very long history of operation as a defined sector of influence. It also needs to be noted that during our early years we had a distinctly school-

based emphasis. A brief overview of many of the key milestones in our short history follows:

Internationally

- It is only 34 years ago that The United Nations General Assembly established World Environment Day.
- In 1975 the Belgrade Charter, and in 1977 the Tbilisi Declaration, both developed under the auspices of the UNESCO and United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), outlined specific objectives for the implementation of environmental education.
- In 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro and also known as the Earth Summit, prepared a framework for international action—Agenda 21. Chapter 36, entitled "Promoting Education, Awareness and Training", called on nations to integrate environmental education throughout all levels and sectors of society. Note that this was the first major call for Environmental Education/Education for sustainability of the broad spectrum that we see today, sometimes more in policies than practices.
- In 1991 the phrase *triple bottom line* was first coined.
- In 2004 the UNESCO Decade of Education for Sustainable Development was launched, as an outcome of the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) held in Johannesburg.

Nationally

- 1970 - the first EE conference in Australia was hosted by the Academy of Science.
- 1979 - AAEE was established.
- 1984 - the Victorian Association of Environmental Education (VAEE) was formed through the amalgamation of two existing organizations, the Environmental Teachers Association (ETA) and the Environmental Studies Association Victoria (ESAV).
- 1993 - postgraduate qualifications in EE were made available at Macquarie University.
- 2000 - the document *Environmental Education for a Sustainable Future: National Action Plan* was released, and the National Environmental Education Council established, by the Federal Minister for the Environment and Heritage.
- 2005 - a Decade for Education for Sustainable Development UNESCO meeting was held in Melbourne.
- 2005 - *Educating for a Sustainable Future: A National Environmental Education Statement for Australian Schools* was released.

State, Territory and local levels

The significant developmental points for State, Territory and local levels vary with an area's history and situation. Time does not allow for them all to be listed here but, for example, in 2002 the NSW Council on Environmental Education was established, and *Learning for Sustainability: The NSW Government Environmental Education Plan 2002 to 2005* was launched. This was one of the first State level documents in Australia to

promote and guide the implementation of EE across all sectors and to promote a reasonably comprehensive approach to moving towards Education for Sustainability.

From the perspective of the AAEE, there are two conflicting statements that can be made about this history. The first is that as a sector of influence EE/EfS is in its early stages of development and should be allowed time to progress, mature and increase its sphere and strength of influence. The second view is that we—Australian environmental educators—have had long enough! We live in a resource finite world, a world where sustainability is neither explicit, nor urgently pursued, as a mainstream goal. It is a world in which our children and their children will suffer dramatically as a direct result of the decisions and continuing consumerism of most societies. In line with this view, it is time AAEE stood up with ‘the big boys and girls’ and delivered on the potential inherent in both the enormous task facing EE/EfS and the wealth of human resource within our profession. It will not come as a surprise to those of you who know me that I favour the second position. The achievements, limitations and challenges outlined below come firmly from this perspective.

3. Some achievements of EE/EFS

Our list of achievements is long and the following summary only just does justice to some of them.

3.1 Gaining a ‘licence’ from the community and strong support from government

The Environmental Education/EfS sector operates with a licence from the community that is promoted through government. In this country we are fortunate enough to have strong support for EE/EfS from our governments. Sure, we don’t always agree with everything they do, and we are a bit like Oliver in always wanting more, but given the enormity of the sustainability challenge this is a reasonable desire. Generally, education is seen as an increasingly credible player in the mix of tools used to assist communities move towards more sustainable ways.

Nationally the National Action Plan (NAP) and the work of the Department of Environment and Heritage (DEH) give us a policy framework as well as encouragement and acknowledgement to continue. They provide credibility for our initiatives and a mantle under which to progress. The recent announcement of the intention to review the NAP is welcomed by all educators and the AAEE looks forward to making a significant contribution to the new plan, just as we did to the first one. Governments and community/professional organisations need each other and AAEE looks forward to exciting and progressive years ahead.

Apart from the NAP there are now significant structures that the DEH have put in place to promote and raise the profile of EE nationally. For example, the National Environmental Education Network (NEEN), the National Environmental Education Council (NEEC) and the Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability (ARIES) are important to the ongoing and increasing presence of EfS. The States and Territories have also played their part in that they have resourced a significant number of EE/EfS programs and have implemented permanent structures like EE Councils with legislative backing – for example, the N.S.W. Council on Environmental Education.

3.2 Delivering a diverse range of programs across a many different sectors

These days, EE it is much broader in its reach and approach. Clearly there are many more people involved in EE now than there were in the past. Undoubtedly this gives us more strength and higher levels of competence, because people are drawn into the mix from diverse backgrounds. However, it also means that education is often delivered by people who don't have a specialty in the area of EE, which is another challenge.

3.3 Becoming more strategic

ARIES reports in their review of Environmental Education and its impact on sustainability, that we:

- are moving from a problem-oriented focus to a positive sense that we can create the future
- are moving from isolated 'problem solving' to 'systemic thinking'
- are taking more time to study and learn from others
- are using the amazing resources and tools available to engage people in learning processes
- are making significant strides in some sectors, particularly in schools (there is a need to continue to push for whole-school approaches, but there is evidence of significant growth within school curriculum and teacher training), and
- need to improve our impact within industry

It is clear that as a field we are setting ourselves loftier goals and evaluating whether we are reaching some of them. We are trying to ascertain what works in a more strategic and systematic way.

3.4 Learning more from each other—and wanting to learn more from others

The strength of the EE/EfS networks that exist around Australia and the desire to belong to them and to attend conferences and workshops, as well as piggy-back on the ideas and programs of others are all real and emerging strengths of our work and ones that we must continue to develop and expand. Better and more frequent communication can only assist us all to provide more effective programs.

4. Some limitations of EE/EfS to date

4.1 We have not yet been far-reaching or successful enough

Many, both within and beyond our profession, believe that there is still much that needs to be achieved through the use of education. In a recent address, Tim Costello CEO of World Vision Australia said of EE/EfS: "Your sector has not been successful in bringing industry to sustainability". He also noted that in Australia only 34% of large corporations undertake Corporate Environmental Reporting whereas 81% of companies do so in Japan and 71% in the UK. (Costello, 2006)

Further, we were reminded of the following at the same conference by Ogbuigwe, head of Environmental Education and Training at the United Nations Environmental Program:

“The world’s richest people (20%) consume nearly 75% of the planet’s natural resources” (Ogbugwe, 2006). In addition, many writers such as Mark Taylor, Director of Environmental Science at Macquarie University, question the possibility or desirability of ‘permanent growth’:

The infinite growth model is not feasible because it relies on finite resources. There is an urgent need to restructure the economy so that it functions within the renewable capacity of the earth. (Taylor, 2006)

However, as part of the Australian mainstream culture we continue to be told that economic growth is the only real goal. Franklin D. Roosevelt—as quoted in Costello (2006) – had it right in the following quote, but in Australia we are yet to appreciate fully and act on this aspect of social and economic sustainability: “The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much. It is whether we provide enough for those who have too little”.

Despite the fact that many of the multitude of problems to be solved on the road to sustainability do have practical solutions we have not made an impact at a level that satisfies any of us in our heart of hearts. That’s because solutions are made more difficult when politicians and many other community leaders constantly ignore what seems obvious to us or speak in less-than-reliable ways about the problem.

4.2 The change is not extensive enough

We are seeing real change in some sectors (for example, schools) and some actions (for example, resource recovery or household water use). But our efforts in providing learning experiences which help Australians to change community norms and move towards substantial, far-reaching sustainable behaviour have been patchy at best. Reinforcing pro-environmental and pro-social behaviour and assisting all Australians at home and at work towards behaviour change, is at the heart of this challenge.

4.3 Some Australian States and Territories have no overarching framework for EE/EfS. Where this is the case AAEE has a responsibility to push hard for this.

We will make real progress when all States and Territories have a strongly enunciated policy framework and put an effective level of resources into EE/EfS. Such a framework would demand *significant* action across *all* sectors. Key elements in it would include the identification of industry operational change as a significant priority, and the placing of education and training in this area at the same level as work with other sectors, for example schools.

4.4 We are missing some really important opportunities and issues

For a start, we are currently almost two years into the Decade for Education for Sustainable Development and what progress have we made? We need to take big strides quickly to further the Decade. We need to determine how to make the Decade work for us (see below) and get on and make it happen so that more can be achieved while the spotlight of the Decade is available.

Clearly there are also some issues where education lags behind. For example, while some effective areas of work are being done in some places, we have generally been slow to make the most of the opportunities offered now that climate change is a priority issue for governments and industry, and to provide effective education programs on a broader scale.

4.5 We fail to evaluate and report on our efforts extensively enough

There is still too little evaluation of our efforts, and when evaluation is done it is often poorly planned and/or reported upon. All of us must improve our efforts here. We need to be able to provide evidence-based descriptions for stakeholders and funding agencies about outcomes that our education efforts are supporting.

4.6 We lack professional standards and accreditation

Unlike other professional groups we do not have a ready and mandated set of standards that drive our practice. We lack an educator accreditation system and unwittingly, and unhelpfully, promote the premise that ‘anyone can do EE/EfS’. While that is clearly not the case, the significance of the lack of professional standards cannot be understated. It is one of our biggest limiting factors. Imagine working in a public health system without having undertaken some sort of registration process. Not only do we not have that, we don’t even have a set of agreed standards that guide employers and training providers.

4.7 We still have not sorted whether we are about EE, Education (or Learning) for Sustainability (EfS or LfS), or Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

The Brundtland Report (WCED1987) was a key focus for an already existing conceptual process that put Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) in front of us as a challenge. The movement towards sustainability as a concept and LfS as a vehicle was first amplified at the UNCED conference in Rio. It was further developed through the difficulties associated with the Kyoto Protocol from 1997 and it gained significant momentum in Johannesburg in 2002. The label given to the ‘Decade’ – ‘Education for Sustainable Development’ – adds more complication and the shifts backwards and forwards have confused the process a little. Are we talking about EfS, LfS or Education for Sustainable Development or Sustainability Education? Or are we talking about just a 2006 version of Environmental Education? And does it matter? In my view it does, and as a field we need to sort it out if only because of the confusion this multitude of terminology breeds, one we need to overcome to bring everyone along together. The development of the second National Action Plan can take us a long way forward if it sorts out some of this confusion.

5. Challenges for the Future for EE/ EfS

5.1 Credibility, framework and direction

As Ogbuigwe has pertinently remarked: “*If you don’t change where you are going you might get where you are going*” (2006).

Credibility: From a range of needs studies of educators, it is clear that many of us still lack credibility in our workplaces and we are seen as the lowest faces on the totem pole. Unfortunately, it seems that education is often the last tool that is reached for when any

environmental management program is being developed. Because we are (willingly!) tied to that tool this challenge requires us to take a more robust view of our own professionalism and a more strategic orientation to what we do. An important part of developing a new professional approach is to become increasingly capable as critically reflective practitioners and to form networks that dialogue about practice. This will help us to become clearer about where we can improve our performance.

Framework: In addition, as indicated above, we have a challenge in finding, agreeing and sticking to a label: EfS, LfS, Sustainability Education, Education for Sustainable Development, or perhaps another. To my mind, what we do must be strongly linked to ‘sustainability outcomes’ and if the Decade drives that, then we use the DESD label, although personally I believe it is the least useful of the alternatives.

Direction: We need all jurisdictions to develop and drive policies and activities that promote the extensive use of education integrated with other disciplines, as the significant tool for environmental management and change.

5.2 Making the Decade work for us

According to Carl Lindberg, Adviser to the Director General of UNESCO on DESD: “Education must inspire the belief that each of us has both the power and the responsibility to effect positive change on a global scale”. (2005)

We know that DESD has provided us with a ten-year period to focus our attention on education for sustainable development. Ogbuigwe provides us with a substantial challenge—and vision:

Let us infuse the underlying values of sustainable development into education and infuse that education into our institutions and organisations; our highways and byways; our offices and houses; into our lifestyle and of course into governance!
(Ogbuigwe 2006)

Means of meeting this goal could include a strongly-voiced call to use the Decade of ESD as a means to gain profile for ESD. This can be the responsibility of all of us even in the absence of a national framework. Can I suggest that we could all work at creating a vision within our organisations about where we want to be at the end of the Decade in 2014, a vision accompanied by a set of steps – a Strategic Plan – to reach it? And we would, of course, need to think about and discuss what indicators we would use to achieve it.

5.3 Appreciating that learning is a sophisticated business and that we are in a time requiring great change

We need to fight being seen as the ‘soft and fluffy’ part of the game of environmental management. We need to be able to show that education is a credible mechanism to promote behaviour change and reinforcement of appropriate behaviour. We need to work hard and long to achieve improved interventions with industry and the adult community so that substantial change towards more sustainable behaviours occurs in the way people do things. This work is not easy and tests the competence of all of us who provide

education. It is essential that all of us have a depth of understanding of the nature of change and reflect this in the design of our projects.

5.4 Identifying, promoting and improving our professional standards

We've got to continuously improve what we do. We especially need to demonstrate improved program design and evaluation. We also need to identify what professional standards are required to work in our field and to promote them with vigour. I don't need to say it to this audience, but we do need to say loudly that NOT everyone can develop education that works, education that really has an impact upon what people do and believe.

5.5 Dealing more strategically with issues of overwork and over-expectation

Clearly, for most of us there is too much to do and too little time. All of the limitations and challenges detailed above make this an even bigger quandary. For all of us this means developing ways to work more efficiently and more effectively in order to achieve more.

6. How Might the Association Help?

The Association has three important roles and responsibilities in the provision of ongoing support for EE/EfS practitioners. They are:

- *to promote the most extensive and effective use of the tool of education to help people to behave more sustainably. It must advocate and lobby strongly to reach this reality.*
- *to support via professional development and other more direct means the work of its members and others.*
- *to use and develop more intensively the capabilities of all members of our profession, whether 'new chum' or 'old hand', to participate in local networks that provide people support and promote the sharing of programs and skills.*

In this industry we deserve a vibrant association, where continuing membership is a norm for us and for all of our peers. We deserve a professional body that works for us and with us to enhance the status of EE/EfS and to improve the capacity of education to assist people towards more sustainable behaviour, attitudes, knowledge and skills. We are on the road to reinvigorating the AAEE so that it becomes such a body in a more comprehensive way. Join us in this challenge by being an active member now; that will help our profession move out boldly into Williamson's 'light ... that frightens us'.

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Some Helpful References

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