

# **Environmental Awareness: Overcoming Ignorance and Apathy by Getting People 'Outside'**

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During the last one hundred years the industrialized nations of the world have witnessed an unprecedented rate of growth in wealth accompanied by increasing consumption of natural resources and material goods. This pursuit of wealth has had a tremendous effect on ecosystems and the environment. In *Something New Under the Sun*, J.R. McNeill writes that "humans have impacted our planet more deeply in the twentieth century than we did in all previous history combined." Indeed, environmental problems now run rampant across the globe. The more serious issues include: ozone deterioration; deforestation; global warming; suburban sprawl and other human developments that disrupt ecosystems; urban air pollution; soil erosion; and species extinction.

Industrialized nations are either unaware of these problems or not sufficiently concerned about this state of affairs to address these issues. Ignorance and apathy exists at every level of society, from the everyday consumers who fail to recycle, a United States President who withdraws from international environmental treaties, and corporations who pressure public officials to relax standards regarding pollutant emissions.

McNeill writes that "human history since the dawn of agriculture is replete with unsustainable societies... many of which changed their ways and survived. They changed not to sustainability but to some new and different kind of unsustainability." This shift away from sustainability signaled the beginning of many environmental problems coupled with a marked ignorance about the damage being done to the environment.

The lack of consideration and apathy about environmental problems arises from a disconnect that has developed between humans and the land on which they live. The spread of Christianity has helped propagate this disconnect, as explained by Roderick Nash, who wrote that "the commandment (Genesis 1:28) which gave man dominion over his environment encouraged arrogance rather than respect." Before the agricultural revolution, food surpluses did not exist and societies were intimately tied to the land as their only means of survival. With the advent of modern agricultural techniques and the beginning of industrialization, societies lost their historical connection with the environment. People could live in cities and still depend on a constant supply of food and material goods. This disconnect has allowed environmental problems to go unnoticed or unattended as the industrialized nations of the world continue to increase economic development and the consumption of natural resources.

The end result of this disconnect is that we now have societies, especially in the industrialized world, who do not understand the importance of a healthy environment and its relation to the overall welfare and health of humans. Despite efforts to the contrary, industrialized nations are still mostly ignorant and apathetic in terms of environmental awareness. Appreciation for the natural beauty of the earth appears to be non-existent at times.

The first step in addressing our current environmental problems is to develop an environmentally-conscious society. Education is an important key towards achieving the goal of environmental awareness. In colleges and universities across the country, Environmental Science is a growing field of study, and high schools are beginning to integrate environmental studies into their curriculums as well. Despite these efforts, the contributions to environmental awareness are still limited at this time. Classroom education has not overcome the disconnect between humans and the environment, and citizens have yet to reestablish their historical appreciation for the land. Charles Piller writes in *The Fail-Safe Society* that "young people are a time bomb—a sign of growing public disengagement that could soon make genuine democratic involvement in decisions about environmental health and safety impossible." These young people must be reached in order to achieve the goal of environmental awareness, and the approach must be different than through the traditional textbook and classroom.

I propose that we move classrooms "outside" and begin to teach environmental education with a more hands-on approach. This would be something more than a nature walk in the city park; it would involve getting people out into the backcountry for extended periods of time. This would allow people to actually reside in the particular environment being studied. An important aspect of raising environmental consciousness includes reestablishing an appreciation for the land; this can be achieved by taking people into the backcountry where they can live and learn.

Moving the classroom "outside" would require a dual approach, combining environmental education with backcountry education. The backcountry portion is a necessity because most citizens in the industrialized world have become insulated from the majority of hazards that would confront a backcountry traveler: freezing temperatures; flash-floods; avalanches; dangerous travel routes; water shortages; and unpredictable wildlife. Many people are indeed frightened of the backcountry without the modern conveniences of a motor home.

In order to convince people to study environmental education outdoors, it is necessary to provide a component that teaches the technical skills needed to live and travel safely and comfortably in the backcountry. This would involve instruction in every aspect of backpacking: campsite selection; safe travel routes; backcountry first aid and hygiene; cooking; water purification; common backcountry hazards; orienteering; and proper backpacking equipment. More advanced technical backcountry skills to be learned include mountaineering, canoeing, sea and white-water kayaking, rock and ice climbing, caving, and canyoneering.

By teaching these outdoor skills in concert with environmental education, fears about the dangers of the backcountry will begin to dissipate as people feel more comfortable away from the developed world. As this comfort grows, people will be more apt and willing to travel and study in the backcountry, and the goal of 'outdoor environmental education' will be furthered.

At present, there is some progress in combining environmental education with backcountry travel. Companies such as the National Outdoor Leadership School, Overland Expeditions, Longacre Expeditions, and Outward Bound all provide some degree of this type of education in their curriculums. However, each of these companies has extremely high tuition rates. The majority of the participants in these programs come from a privileged minority of people from affluent families. Despite the fact that these companies are providing the type of education that I am proposing, it is not accessible to enough people to effect change.

In order to truly effect social change, a combination of environmental and backcountry education must be available to each young person that Piller refers to in *The Fail-Safe Society*. Because it would be impractical to begin at a national level, a more realistic strategy would be to begin at the state level or perhaps even individual school districts.

Government-subsidized programs similar to the companies listed above would be a good way to make outdoor environmental education more affordable for more people. These ideas could also be integrated into our public school system. Federal or state funding could assist with both of these efforts.

The involvement of a large percentage of school-age students with these programs would produce a core of citizens who would be much more in tune with the environment. From a grass-roots level to the highest governmental offices in the country, a society that is environmentally conscious and more willing to adopt rigorous environmental legislation would be realized.

Current environmental problems will never be adequately addressed until citizens in the industrialized world fully comprehend the necessity of a healthy planet. These citizens will never overcome their ignorance or apathy until they develop a connection with the land and a desire to gain environmental education. Acquiring environmental education in an outdoor setting would provide a unique learning experience and allow students to develop these connections. Affordable tuition rates for these types of programs would increase this possibility.

With a concerted effort from educators and public officials, an environmentally-conscious society could become a reality. Once established, greater protection will be provided for the environment through both legislation and personal actions. Through outdoor environmental education, humans will begin to recover their lost appreciation for planet Earth.

## References

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