



GREEN PAPER

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A Practitioner Discusses Diversity

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Diversity. There is no issue that is more important to many practitioners in environmental education. We want our programs to reach broad audiences with relevant information, skills and values. We believe passionately that environmental issues and learning about the world in which we live is important to all people. Many of us are especially concerned about the justice of numerous environmental problems, since many low income and minority people live in areas where pollution and other forms of environmental degradation are serious problems.

*We are committed to the philosophy that environmental education is for everybody—all ages, abilities, races, religions, economic levels and backgrounds. Yet we face the ongoing truth, rooted in both reality and perception, that our programs tend to attract majority populations and those with moderate or higher income levels. We face challenges in attracting people from diverse backgrounds to serve on our staffs and our boards. We read articles, attend workshops and have personal commitments to change, but we stumble when it comes to action. **How do well meaning environmental educators move from commitment to making effective changes?***

*This green paper is designed to be a discussion piece for boards, committees, staff members and others to use as a springboard in making changes in their organizations and programs. As the writer of this paper, I am by no means an expert on this issue. I have served in this field for over twenty-five years, and am deeply committed to diversity being essential. By writing this, I am on a journey with you, the readers, in listening to other voices, and considering how I can push my organization and others to change the way we think and the way we take action to truly listen and serve others in our work. This paper does not offer answers, but rather offers suggestions and ideas based on the voices of two educators, one local to Ohio and one national. **Read, listen, plan and take action.** Then share what you learn and how you succeed with others so we can all strive to make positive changes.*

Barzella Canaday has 34 years of experience as an educator. She began her career as a classroom teacher. After 17 years she became a guidance counselor where she worked with elementary and middle school students. She then became an administrator at the middle school level for 10 years in the Cleveland Municipal School District. In this role she made arrangements for eighth graders to make annual visits to a residential environmental education center for hands-on experiences in environmental education. Even though she is retired as a middle

school principal, she has continued in her role as an educator. She supervises student teachers at the college level and has served as a consultant, first for the Cleveland Municipal schools and now for the state of Ohio as a part of the "No Child Left Behind" Federal Act.

She offers insight into why environmental education is important to urban children. This is an audience who, because of funding and circumstance, is often under served by environmental education programs.

Q Environmental educators are often asked about the value of “taking children out of the city” to a more natural setting to participate in environmental education programs. Why is it important for students to participate in environmental education programs?

A It is important for ANY student to participate in an environmental education program because of the need for every citizen to be aware of issues that affect their environment, like air quality, water quality, energy consumption and conservation, and preservation of natural habitats. These environmental issues affect urban students the same as any other student. They must become knowledgeable about the need to preserve the quality of the air they breathe and the water they drink. They need to know the origin of the energy they use, its availability, the alternatives, and their role in the selection process. Urban students need to think about habitat in nearby green spaces. How else can they become advocates of its preservation?

Environmental education is “real life” education. It is not something students can just read about, take a test and move on to the next unit. Urban students, like all students, learn best under conditions which emphasize observing, describing objects, collecting specimens, experimenting, and discovering. As a principal, it was important to provide opportunities for students to apply knowledge gained to everyday life. If students cannot apply what they “learned,” what good is it?

Q In particular, what aspects of environmental education are most critical for ALL students?

A I think the most critical aspect is for students to acquire an environmental consciousness. This comes as a result of acquired awareness, knowledge, and the appreciation for the environment that environmental education provides. Once consciousness is in place, it follows that issues like recycling, stewardship, making well-informed choices and becoming proactive for the environment can be addressed.

In this era of tests and standards, much of the information and activities in environmental education can be integrated across curriculum areas that address outcomes. This is a major benefit for schools that are striving to improve student achievement.

Q What do you believe are the most important environmental issues facing urban children and families?

A Water quality, air pollution, preservation and/or creation of green space, and recycling are the most critical issues for young people living in an urban environment. The quality of water and air has direct connection to physical health. There is so much documentation of this fact that students need only do a minimum of research to see the connections. Green space issues are

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important for two reasons. The first one is aesthetic. There is a need to have a view of the landscape from home or school that is pleasing. The other reason is that maintaining green space is critical to having balance in nature.

Many urban areas have started recycling programs. These programs are only successful if the citizenry buys into the reasons for participating. Students need to be involved in discussions and experiences around this issue.

Q Sometimes concern is expressed about bringing urban children to a park or natural setting, extolling the wonders of nature, then sending them back to a sometimes bleak urban setting. Is this a problem? Are there ways to make a natural setting relevant to urban children?

A It is not good to limit students because of some misguided perception that students will somehow be damaged by having to go home after

being in parks or similar settings. If this kind of logic is followed, then students in urban environments would never get an opportunity to see nature “first hand” for fear of harming them. Also, this incorrect notion assumes that the urban environment is unquestionably inferior to one closer to nature. Students can appreciate a beautiful natural setting, compare it favorably or unfavorably with their own surroundings, and make informed decisions because of the experience.

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Children, especially younger ones, have trouble with the concept that urban areas were once forests and meadows. The subject is naturally relevant because they need to see that aspect of how our modern-day society evolved. They could also become activists in favor of preserving the green spaces that remain. Experiences at nature centers offer a retreat for some students and offer all young people the opportunity to connect with the natural world.

One of the biggest challenges many environmental education centers face is hiring a diverse teaching staff. Do you have suggestions on how we can appeal to a more diverse pool of employees?

Consider offering internships for high school students from urban areas. Offer summer work study experiences for students. Partner with universities that have minority students in their science programs. Provide focused staff recruitment at historically Black colleges.

Related to the last question, do you see a big problem with bringing Black and Hispanic students to a facility that is staffed almost entirely with White instructors? Do you have suggestions on how staff can develop racial/economic/cultural sensitivities to the diverse student populations that are served?

Children naturally identify with people like themselves. Thus they are more likely to see how they fit into a particular observation, discovery, or experiment if they see someone like themselves. In addition, it is easier for them to envision that some day they could be in the same position as the staff members.

It's important to gain a perspective on the attitudes of prospective and present employees as it relates to race, economics, and cultural differences. Workshops on diversity are a must. It would be tragic for students to draw the incorrect conclusion that being involved in or being an advocate for environmental issues is limited to those who are white, able bodied, and of a certain economic status or religion.

The lack of minorities in environmental education exists because of past practices. Historically, African Americans and Hispanics in urban areas have not been invited to, or expected to, become involved in environmental issues. Hopefully this is changing. Environmental education centers have an unprecedented opportunity to make a change in this practice by reaching out to minorities.

Emilio N. Williams has more than 25 years of experience in training, group facilitation and human resource development. He currently serves as the President of the Koi Group, a select group of training professionals specializing in group facilitation, training, storytelling, staff and organizational development, diversity, and building multicultural collaborations. He has worked with many local and national organizations in the area of cultural competency and the extent to which organizations and individuals can become intentionally inclusive in their practices, hiring, programs, grants and outreach to culturally diverse audiences. Emilio holds a Masters of Human Services degree from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania.

Most, if not all, environmental education practitioners are committed philosophically to diversity in staffing, governance and programs. They believe wholeheartedly in serving a broad range of people. Yet many

environmental education programs tend to attract mainly white, middle class audiences. Staff and board members tend to be from white, suburban backgrounds. What advice can you give as to how to truly diversify operations and programs?

It is good to have a philosophical commitment to diversity. It is almost like the contradiction between theory and practice. We believe in diversity but don't manifest it. Begin with holding a brief dialogue with others around their philosophy and how that might more effectively play out in the organization and the work that they are doing. People might feel a certain way philosophically but feel trapped and not know what to do. Consider providing an opportunity for a visioning session rooted in the discussion of diversity where staff, board and other potential stakeholders are invited to plan together. Good intentions many times leave out the values of those you might be trying to reach.

Examine advertising and promotional materials. You may be getting exactly what you're asking for. What do the images, pictures, words, tone, colors, convey? Where, when and how is information distributed?

Consider doing a cultural audit and ask who would feel most comfortable in your setting. Look at posters, pictures, music, staffing, materials, books, etc. What does the physical setting where programs are held say about who is involved in your programs?

Are your programs relevant to the needs of community and/or a broader constituency base? When and how do you assess needs? Do you assume what people want or do you involve the community in program planning?

Does your organization set requirements or are there structural barriers (education, transportation, geography, etc.) that prohibit or discourage others from being full participants? This is often a problem for nature centers and parks. Can you address these barriers in some way?

Some people suggest that environmental education is an extra that is not relevant to urban and/or impoverished audiences. They suggest that we should focus more on basic needs such as access to health care, food, etc. How do you respond to this?

Consider place-based learning and relevance of the community and its needs...of, for, and by the people makes sense. We have done more along the lines of nature-based education to the extent that we have forgotten what the "environment" actually is. I think it comes back to the definition of environment. Often times environmental educators forget about the environ (all that surrounds) and the mental (thought – psychology) and thus lose sight of what surrounds us. Relevance is an interesting word; sometimes environmental educators don't have the skills or the interests to make better links and/or connections to diverse individuals and communities. When they do, other needs and issues are often integrated into good environmental education programs.

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What are the top three things you would suggest to nature centers to make them more hospitable to diverse audiences?

Local programming, exhibits, themes, functions, meetings – work with key individuals in the community to see how they might better use or work with your center. Get people there and create an experience that will increase curiosity and involvement. Conduct planning meetings IN the community—at schools, churches or neighborhood centers. Don't expect people to come to you.

Provide internships, staff positions, board and committee opportunities and look for ways to increase the level of diversity (youth, gender, race) – you will have to be strictly intentional

about this. Don't accept the statement that there are "none of them out there who are interested."

Connect the natural and human environment so that you are not talking about two entirely different things. Relate the natural environment to environmental justice—the two are intertwined.

Q. How do you compare the value of environmental education that deals with environmental issues to those programs that focus on understanding nature? Is there benefit to both?

A. There is benefit to making connections for people between environmental issues that they face and understanding natural systems. They will be good decision makers in their community if they make these connections.

There is also tremendous benefit in providing study of environmental issues and nature education as you look at the merging and/or cross-cultural conflict between races, geography, and classes. Both areas are valuable and more work needs to be done to help people from various perspectives better understand

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stereotyping and perceptions of others who are different from them. Often times we go to one extreme or the other as to whether we focus just on nature or simply on issues. It is not necessarily fashionable for some to be in the outdoors but some of that is simply from a lack of experience.

Q. As you've looked at models of environmental education programs that are successful in addressing diversity, what are some common traits?

A. The most important aspect is relationship building. Successful programs have leaders who

built relationships with the community. They approach their programs, staffing and governance from a place of relationships and equality. They are active in the community and they take very seriously the need to be intentional about seeking diversity. Their organizations don't become diverse because "it's the right thing to do," they become diverse because they have built relationships that make diversity essential.

I have worked with a number of highly successful programs. All of them work hard to bring people together. They admit that they have shortcomings in their ability to reach diverse audiences and that they need help. They focus on the assets that they bring to the community. Their leaders dialogue with community leaders about what they have and what the community has, and where these assets intersect.

Consider this question. Are you trying to help or fix a community, or the environment, or are you striving to cooperate, collaborate and coordinate efforts in order to solve problems? Remember that programs created BY a community are better than programs created FOR a community.

IN CONCLUSION . . .

How will the advice of Barzella and Emilio help me as a practitioner, take action to address diversity?

1. **Ask and listen.** We will only know how to change our practices if we listen to those who are not currently represented on our board and staff and who do not attend our programs. We need to be intentional about involvement in the community and listening to others.
2. **Work as hard as we can to see that our staff and our board is diverse.** It is not acceptable to come up with excuses. Our leaders must represent the communities and diverse people we serve. Connect with other organizations in the community that serve diverse populations (churches, community/neighborhood centers, ethnic organizations, organizations that are

comprised of minorities, etc.) to assist with recruitment.

- 3. Provide training for board and staff** to assure that we do the best we can at being sensitive to people with varying ethnic, racial and cultural backgrounds, diverse physical and mental abilities and people with varying financial resources. See that our physical setting, our language, our program content, and our operations are **welcoming** and inclusive to all people.
- 4. Analyze curriculum and program content** to see that it provides basic environmental literacy with solid nature education AND that it deals with environmental issues. Take seriously the

need to be advocates for environmental justice. Recognize the environmental degradation that many people in our community face and see that our programs provide the attitudes, knowledge and skills to empower people to work for change.

- 5. Be proud of our settings and what we already provide.** Allow ample opportunities for people to be inspired by simply being in our settings.
- 6. Care about the people we serve, those we haven't reached and those who work with us as staff and volunteers. Let care for others and for nature be the center of all that we do.**

About the author: Deb Yandala is currently the Chief Executive Officer of Cuyahoga Valley National Park Association in Peninsula, Ohio. She previously served as executive director of the association's environmental education center and has worked with several other camps and environmental education programs. She is a past president of the Environmental Education Council of Ohio and has a B.A. from Miami University and an M.S. in Environmental Education from the University of Michigan.

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