Chapter 6
Participation and the Ecology of Environmental Awareness and Action

Louise Chawla

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6.1 Introduction

This chapter takes up two questions essential to participatory environmental education: What experiences prepare children to be aware of their environment and to take action on its behalf? And, how can communities support children’s environmental learning and action? I suggest answers to these questions based on an ecological approach to psychology and show how research on the significant life experiences of people committed to environmental education and action can be understood within this framework. I also argue that environmental education can most productively encourage children to know, value, and protect the diversity of life on this planet if it builds on a theoretical foundation that embeds human development in an ecological context.

6.2 Learning to see and Learning to Take Action

Growing up to know and value the diversity of life is partly a matter of learning to see: learning to see communities of plants and animals, details of their individual existence and interactions, and patterns of their ever-changing habitats. In cities and towns it includes learning to see the diversity of human communities and the ways in which people interact with their place. As the wildlife biologist Aldo Leopold observed many years ago, environmental education faces a great challenge, ‘how to bring about a striving for harmony with land among people, many of whom have forgotten there is any such thing as land, among whom education and culture have
become almost synonymous with landlessness’ (Leopold 1949, 1966:210). Therefore this chapter begins with a discussion of theories of perception.

Yet, learning to see brings risks as well as fascination and delight. What if a person sees painful things? As Leopold (1949, 1966:197) also observed, ‘one of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds.’ He compared attentiveness to the land, in the midst of a culture that is largely oblivious to the effects of its actions on other forms of life, to the condition of ‘the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise’ (ibid.). Therefore, learning to see needs to be balanced by learning to take action on the environment’s behalf – learning that one is not, in fact, alone, learning how to organise and collaborate with others in order to investigate the sources of problems, and learning how to build a common vision for a better world and take steps to bring it to reality. This goal is comparable to the concept of action competence that has been defined by Jensen and Schnack (1997) and Breiting and Mogensen (1999). It is the theme of the second half of this chapter.

For both learning to see and learning to take action, participation in the life of one’s community is essential – where ‘community’ is meant in an expansive sense of the plants and animals as well as the people and cultures of one’s locality. To maintain this broad meaning, this chapter is equally concerned with formal and informal participation. Informal participation involves freedom to move about and explore natural and built environments, to gather with others and to observe and try out roles in public places. Children cannot see the diversity of life unless they have a chance to venture out into it. By getting out, they come to find out about issues taken up in formal channels for participation, like the loss of habitat or homelessness. Thus formal and informal participation are two interdependent sides of the inclusion of children in their communities. Through freedom to move about in their localities and become part of diverse settings, children gain authority to speak about the conditions that they find. They also gain reasons to become involved. If they have benefited from open and accessible communities with a variety of resources, they are likely to defend these advantages. If they live in places that are boring or dangerous, but they have had opportunities to see alternatives, they are likely to advocate a more generous plan (see, for example, Chapter 18 by Barratt and Barratt Hacking, this volume).

One advantage of ecological psychology for environmental education is that it directs attention to the importance of informal as well as formal learning. In doing so it accommodates the learning of very young children, from infancy up, who primarily know their communities through the informal contexts of everyday life. Typically, when formal mechanisms for participatory planning involve young people they focus on pre-adolescents and adolescents. Younger children, however, often have thoughtful views as well. Even before they learn to talk, their disposition to engage with the world and to make their mark – a disposition essential for community participation – is rooted in infancy. Ecological psychology provides a foundation for a conception of environmental education that extends beyond the school to all areas of a child’s life and furthermore, to all periods of the life span. It lays responsibility for the quality of environmental learning not only on the