Environmental conservation education in the United States of America

Matthew J. Brennan

It would be funny if it were not so serious. Faced with a national crisis of rapid deterioration of the quality of the environment, the people of the United States of America have turned to education for solutions. And education has no solutions. Yet there has always been conservation education, and for the past sixty or seventy years there have been serious efforts by many governments, industry and private organizations to promote a wiser use of the environment and its resources.

Today, faced with the demands of scientists, social scientists and the general public, the race to develop educational programmes in conservation is on. Lacking any plan, we have run off in all directions in our haste to develop an ‘instant’ education programme to match our instant replay of television action, instant rice and mashed potatoes and instant answers to questions with no answers, only possible alternatives for action.

Some are naïve enough to believe that changing the name from conservation education to environmental education will bring instant results, success where there was failure, support where no support was available.

Hopefully, a plan for conservation education will emerge from all the diverse programmes which are being developed, and for which at least token financial support is available.

In order to understand the new programmes in conservation education it may be helpful to review briefly the problems and programmes of the past and indicate how they may be used to advantage or modified in the programmes of the future. Bear in mind that an over-all plan for a total education programme did not, and still does not, exist.

Definition of conservation

Basic to the development of any plan for conservation education is a definition of conservation on which all could agree. Until very recently there was no definition. Everyone defined conservation to suit his own interests and needs. However, the definition developed by Dr Paul F. Brandwein and myself at the Pinchot Institute, namely, ‘recognition by man of his interdependence with his environment and all of life and his responsibility to maintain the environment in a manner fit for life and fit for living’, was accepted by the major conservation education organizations of the United States and has become the basis for the various versions now

being used. For example, the United States Commissioner of Education wrote, ‘Environmental education is intended to promote among citizens the awareness and understanding of the environment, our relationship to it, and the concern and responsible action necessary to assure our survival and to improve the quality of life.’

It appears that we can now all agree that conservation education has two goals—development of understanding about the environment, and development of responsible concern. And, we can proceed with the task of programme development, for the role of education is now clearly indicated.

**Approaches to conservation education**

The primary aim is to develop an understanding of the environment. Again, we can learn from past errors and failures in programmes of conservation education. There have been three general kinds of school programmes which might be called ‘unit’, ‘topical’ and ‘special’.

In a unit, or chapter, conservation was in a segregated unit (or chapter in the textbook), usually in science or geography. It could be included, or omitted, at the whim of the teacher or school administrator. Even where included, it usually had little relation to the rest of the year’s work, and did not indicate man as an actor in the ‘conservation drama’. Fortunately, this approach has generally been abandoned, and the idea of conservation as an integral part of the education experience is gaining acceptance.

In the topical approach, a topic, such as forestry, could be included in the study of plants in science, or in the production and distribution of forest products in geography or economics. While much better than the unit approach, the study of topics has not been generally successful. Teachers’ materials have not been available; and publications of government, industry and private organizations with interest and concern in resource use or protection have been of limited value. Although useful materials were available for the study of forests, soils, water, wildlife and minerals in the science class, there was overemphasis on biological problems. Materials dealing with the social, political, economic or aesthetic factors influencing man’s use of his environment and its resources were not available and, therefore, these critical elements of environmental understanding were not included in school programmes.

In addition, materials on problems of the modern urban-technological society were lacking. There is still little help available for the teacher who wishes to include in her teaching topics on the ‘P’ problems, such as pollution, population, pesticides, poisons, power and poverty of the environment. Another serious limitation to full use of the topic approach is the controversial nature of the topics just listed and the general reluctance of educators to discuss controversial questions in the schools. But, once useful and relevant materials are available and teachers have developed programmes for their use, the topic approach is nevertheless promising.

The special course in conservation has historically been a part of programmes in vocational education, particularly in agriculture. At the secondary level, the special course is gaining increased support, starting with a few courses in forestry, wildlife conservation, and now being implemented in many schools as a final-year, interdisciplinary course involving teachers of science, social science and the humanities in a problem-oriented experience.

**Development of a curriculum plan**

Regardless of the approach, the most serious limitation is the lack of a plan of education.

---