

EcoKids: New Automaton on the Block

by Jo Kwong

The other day my five-year-old twin girls asked me to turn on the Saturday morning cartoons. As I switched on the television, I recognized the characters from Ted Turner's *Captain Planet* and immediately pressed onward in the channel selection. One of my daughters recognized the show and cried, "But I want to watch that!" I explained that Captain Planet teaches children things about the environment and human nature that simply are not true. Reflecting on a phrase used in the show, she asked, "You mean, the power is not with us?" My heart sank as I realized I was finally experiencing one of my worst nightmares: the brainwashing of my children through environmental "education."

As our nation continues its all-consuming pursuit of protecting the environment, "regardless of the cost," we are overlooking the greatest cost of all: the toll on our children. My review of environmental "education" has revealed a number of unsettling trends and strategies. It is apparent, for example, that (1) children are being scared into becoming environmental activists, (2) there is widespread misinformation in ma-

terials aimed at children, (3) children are being taught *what* to think, rather than *how* to think, (4) children are taught that human beings are evil, (5) children are feeling helpless and pessimistic about their future on earth, and (6) environmental education is being used to undermine the simple joys of childhood. Are we raising critically thinking leaders or simple automatons that can recite that latest environmental dogma?

Raising EcoKids

A quick glance at the materials aimed at children and their educators reveals one very apparent trend: a call to activism. The bestseller *50 Simple Things Kids Can Do To Save the Earth*, published by The Earth-Works Group, urges kids to write to their U.S. Senators, the President, and world leaders, or join an environmental group. Suggested groups include the Natural Resources Defense Council, famous for perpetuating hysteria over Alar-treated apples in the late 1980s, and Greenpeace, an organization that even its admirers say built its reputation on publicity stunts and playing "fast and loose" with scientific facts.

The textbook *Your Health*, published by Prentice-Hall, encourages children to "consider joining an environmental group." Its suggestions for further contacts include Greenpeace, Zero Population Growth,

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Planned Parenthood, and Earth First! (a group that has solicited terminally ill people to undertake life-threatening eco-terrorist activities). And *Kid Heroes of the Environment*, another publication of The Earth-Works Group, praises children for conducting petition drives, organizing letter-writing campaigns to political leaders, and boycotting businesses.

The Alley Foundation, a "non-political, non-profit organization dedicated to the environmental education of our youth," distributes a book called "Cry Out." It tells the children, "Unless you take action NOW, the beautiful forests where you go hiking, the beaches where you swim in clean water, the clear morning when you take a breath of sweet-smelling air could all become things of the past."

What's so wrong about these calls to activism? Nothing, really, if children are taught solid facts about environmental science and if they understand the trade-offs involved in adopting alternative courses of action. Yet this hardly seems the case. Children are often taught by people lacking training in environmental subjects.

Consider that the United Nations Environment Programme markets its publication, "Environmental Education for Our Common Future," to teachers "*whatever subject they teach*."¹ Or that school systems across the nation, often at the requirement of government mandates, are incorporating environmental education into traditional subjects such as mathematics, history, languages, and civics. Children are learning from teachers who can barely distinguish myth from fact in the environmental arena.

Myths vs. Facts

Environmental professionals have learned that sensationalism sells. It boosts donations to their non-profit organizations and helps peddle materials to educators. The focus is typically on the negative: how human beings or evil corporations are devastating the environment.

Take the infamous Exxon Valdez oil spill

of March 1989. Environmental groups, recognizing a heaven-sent fund-raising blessing, sprang into action generating statements, press conferences, and reports that portrayed the spill as one of the greatest ecological disasters of all time. The media joined the frenzy. The public was informed that Prince William Sound would take at least 50 to 100 years to recover, and in the meantime the salmon and herring fisheries could go extinct.

Donations to environmental groups, which for many had been on the decline, shot up in response to the dire need for environmental protection. Largely ignored was the evidence that the oil spill was not in fact a major ecological disaster. In 1990, the fish catch topped 40 million, far exceeding the previous record of 29 million in 1987.² Internationally recognized oil pollution experts found the coast recovering nicely one year after the accident.

It seems that the truth loses out if a more sensational version is plausible. For example, children are taught that acid rain is destroying our forests; overpopulation will exhaust our resources; the ozone layer is rapidly being destroyed; and global warming will lead to disastrous climatic change. All of these, and many other scare scenarios, have been widely debated or refuted by experts. Yet, they are taught as facts.

A "Science Gazette" article in a Prentice-Hall textbook describes the consequences of warming of the earth with photographs of houses falling into the sea and a 1930s dust bowl farm. The text notes that warming in the polar regions could melt the ice and increase sea level by "as much as seven or eight meters!" Severe drought would occur in the western United States and "farms might have to be abandoned because of lack of water." In other places, more rain will fall, causing an insect explosion. "Valuable food crops would be gobbled up by millions of insect pests."³

Global warming is portrayed as a sinister process resulting from greedy human behavior. But, in fact, some warming is a natural phenomenon. Essential for the existence of life forms on earth, greenhouse gases, such

as carbon dioxide, raise the average temperature to about 60 degrees Fahrenheit. Scientists disagree on whether increased carbon dioxide from coal burning and auto emissions will change the climate. The understanding is so vague that in the mid to late 1970s, scientists predicted that we were headed for a disaster via global cooling.

Understandably, it is difficult to present a balanced picture in textbooks. For one thing, the need for simple writing for children leads some authors to present issues as black or white, right or wrong. And the need to appease many interest groups in order to gain statewide adoption leads many textbook authors to write from the “politically correct” perspective. Nonetheless, it’s well worth considering the impact that such doom and gloom scenarios may have upon our youth.

Raising Automatons

Environmental policy analyst Jonathan Adler tells about how classrooms of schoolchildren submitted public comments to the Food and Drug Administration on the subject of bioengineered produce. He writes: “Their letters didn’t address the scientific or even, really, the ethical issues: They were about death! They called the biotech tomato ‘Franken Tomato,’ and they pleaded, ‘Please don’t do this, I don’t want to die!’” “The letters were written all at once and they were similar,” continues Adler. “I’d call that brainwashing.”⁴

To treat technology in this emotional way violates our most basic expectations for our children’s education. We need to give them basic tools. They need the scientific knowledge to understand environmental issues. This includes studies of botany, ecology, hydrology, entomology, and so on. Children also need to understand the basic scientific method: that scientific hypotheses must be verified by observation and experimentation. Of course, some of this information is technically beyond the understanding of younger ones, but if they aren’t able to understand the science, they shouldn’t be mobilized to lobby for specific policy options.

Beyond the science, children need to learn about policy processes and decision-making if they are to be thinking activists. Children need to learn about trade-offs. They need to see why, for example, consumers prefer certain types of energy, even though some people feel they are sinister or wasteful. They need to understand what we give up when we pursue one course of action over another. I’ve talked in terms of trade-offs to my daughters ever since they could listen. Even at their young age, they understand that if we buy a toy today, we use up money that can be used to purchase other things. The toy is not good or bad—it simply represents one way we can use our resources.

Yet that perspective is a far cry from the litany of rights and wrongs in the environment. As nearly all school children can recite: Oil is bad, hydroelectric is good. Disposable diapers are bad, cloth diapers are good. Automobiles are bad, bikes are good.

National Geographic’s Wonders of Learning Kit suggests this exercise to teachers of science or language arts: “Have the children write or dictate stories about two imaginary planets, ‘Trashoid 4’ and ‘Recyclet.’ What would the planets look like? How would they be different? What would the beings who live on these planets look like? How would they live?”⁵

While students may be adept at describing the evils of planet Trashoid, few can tell you exactly why something is classified as an environmental good or bad. Children are drilled to accept, for example, that recycling is the only correct way to deal with resources. They are supposed to coerce their parents to sort paper, plastic, aluminum, and glass, and then to haul it all out to the curbside. But they are never given these facts: Each additional recycling truck rumbling through the neighborhood adds vehicle emissions to the air, consumes oil and gas, and increases noise pollution. At the recycling plants, energy is used to process the materials, and huge volumes of wastewater or other waste are typically released. One ceramic mug must be reused more than 1,000 times to consume *less* energy per use

than a polystyrene foam cup.⁶ In other words, sometimes recycling is environmentally friendly; sometimes it is not.

Humans Are Evil

In *50 Simple Things Kids Can Do to Save the Earth*, kids are told, "When your parents were kids, hardly anyone ever worried about saving the environment. . . . They developed some bad habits. They made as much garbage as they wanted; they wasted energy whenever they wanted; they used up the Earth's treasures, just for fun."⁷

This treatment disparages parents; others suggest that parents are stupid. In a discussion of the ozone issue, children are told, "We don't think adults would keep on making these [CFC] gases if they realized they were harming all life on Earth."⁸

Should the environment be a wedge between parents and children? And should children be taught that people carrying out productive activities are evil?

In one preschool exercise, four-year-olds were given four pictures and asked to choose the one that does not belong. They were shown pictures of three different animals in the forest and a picture of a logger. The logger didn't belong. One father volunteered to speak about his industry to his son's fourth-grade class. Upon arrival, he found that the children were quite hostile towards him for being a logger.⁹ His experience illustrates that even the anti-human movement has trends. Ten years ago, children were ashamed to say their dads worked for Hooker Chemical. Now, children feel compelled to hide the fact that their dads log trees.

On the Joys of Being a Child

The drive to create Ecokids has some other very disturbing aspects. For one thing, it has the potential of simply taking the fun out of being a kid.

For example, *50 Simple Things* takes a number of things that have traditionally been a source of joy for children and turns them into potential nightmares. "Helium

balloons? Big, bouncing, bobbing . . . Oops? When helium balloons are released, they are often blown by strong winds into the ocean. Even if the sea is hundreds of miles away, balloons can still land there. Sometimes sea creatures think balloons are food and eat them. Sea turtles, for example, eat jellyfish—which look and wiggle just like clear balloons. If a turtle makes a mistake and eats a balloon, the balloon can block its stomach. So the turtle can starve to death."¹⁰

Similarly, it tells children, "most crayons are made from oil. Since oil comes from prehistoric creatures, you might be coloring with the last remains of a Tyrannosaurus Rex!" or "Have you ever made pictures with markers? Some have chemicals with names like 'toluene' and 'ethanol' in them. Creating these chemicals makes pollution and uses oil."

Even toys don't escape the wrath of environmental education. "Toys just don't come from toy stores. They come from materials taken out of the Earth. So if they break right away, and you have to buy new ones to replace them, you're not only creating a lot of extra garbage, you're using up the treasures of the Earth."

While environmental special interests may view these stories as their successes, others see failure. Are we, as William Bennett asks in his broader statement on the declining moral, spiritual, and aesthetic character and habits of society, guilty of the chronic crime against children: the crime of making them prematurely "old" before their time? "We live in a culture which at times seems almost dedicated to the corruption of the young, to assuring the loss of their innocence before their time."¹¹

Isn't this exactly what we are doing by burdening children with the fright of environmental catastrophes caused by humans? Vice President Al Gore, writing about ozone, says: "We have to tell our children that they must redefine their relationship to the sky, and they must begin to think of the sky as a threatening part of their environment."¹² It certainly seems as if we are dedicated to assuring the loss of their inno-

cence before their time. How else can we explain comment after comment from the mouths of our children that express nothing less than fear of dying and guilt of living?

Consider some of the now-famous quotes by several eco-heroes:

Melissa Poe, age nine: "Mr. President, if you ignore this letter we will all die of pollution and the ozone layer" (from *Newsweek* "Just for Kids!?!").

Catherine Mitchell: "Our Earth is getting hotter every minute and the only way we can stop it is to stop burning styrofoam. I'm also too young to die, might I add, so *stop burning the Earth!*" (from the FACE newsletter).

Jesse Hornstein, age 10: "No gases! No air pollution! It's *life or death*" (from *50 Simple Things*).

Adam Adler, age 11: "I think global warming and the greenhouse effect are very bad! What do we want the earth to become, a flaming ball?" (from *50 Simple Things*).

Fortunately, some educators are having second thoughts about what is happening. In the fall of 1992, Nebraska school teacher Joann Wilson developed an environmental exchange program between classrooms. Using KIDFORUM, a discussion group on Internet's KIDLINK, Wilson and KIDFORUM Coordinator Laura Stefansdottir of Iceland developed "Environment-2093." Students were asked to write short science fiction articles, projecting themselves one hundred years into the future. What would that environment look like?

Almost half the students created doomsday scenarios. Seeing the hopelessness and futility expressed in these tales, Wilson and Stefansdottir were led to examine their part in robbing kids of the youthful idealism we typically associate with "being a kid." These educators and many they have come into contact with are now examining ways to offer positive, creative, and responsible solutions to global concerns. How many others have the courage and foresight to do the same?

Similarly, an article in *Audubon* magazine

suggests that children shouldn't be taught that "the sky is falling."¹³ Like me, the author was moved to a new reality by the words of her daughter. As the six-year-old child settled down in her old-fashioned maple bed, newly handed down by her aunt, she said, "I love my new bed, but . . . it's made of wood. They killed trees to make my bed." To the child, the reality is that a living thing, perhaps one with feeling, was killed for her creature comfort.

In a nutshell, educators have embraced environmentalism to its extreme, fully accepting the anti-human, anti-technology, and anti-economic growth positions. Children are taught what to think and not *how* to think about environmental questions. In a society where we are no longer free to teach traditional values in the school systems, it's unsettling to find new values in the classroom. The widespread teaching of environmental values, based upon politically correct propaganda, is rampant. Those of us who are concerned about individual liberty, freedom of choice, individual responsibility, and property rights, should pay attention to environmental education. □

1. *The UNESCO Courier*, December 1992, p. 25.

2. See, for example, Warren Brookes, "Salmon & Spillionaires," *The Washington Times*, August 29, 1990.

3. Dean Hurd et al., "Science Gazette: Tomorrow's Climate: The Heat's On," in *General Science: A Voyage of Exploration* (Prentice Hall 1992, Third edition), p. 401.

4. Patricia Poore, "Enviro Education: Is It Science, Civics—or Propaganda?" *Garbage*, April/May, 1993, p. 30.

5. National Geographic Society, Washington, D.C., "Wonders of Learning Kit—Primary Level," 1992.

6. Martin B. Hocking, "Disposable Cups Have Eco Merit," *Nature*, May 12, 1994, p. 107.

7. EarthWorks Group, *50 Simple Things Kids Can Do to Save the Earth* (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1992), p. 124.

8. EarthWorks Group, p. 59.

9. I'm thankful to William Perry Pendley, president of the Mountain States Legal Foundation in Denver, Colorado, for sharing his children's experiences with me.

10. EarthWorks Group, p. 35. Subsequent quotations are from pages 33 and 24.

11. William J. Bennett, "Getting Used to Decadence: The Spirit of Democracy in Modern America," Heritage Lectures, No. 477, Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., December 1993.

12. Ron Bailey, "The Hole Story," *Reason*, June 1992, p. 26.

13. Nancy Bray Cardozo, "Reading, Writing & Ruin," *Audubon*, January-February 1994.

The Role of Rights

by Roger E. Meiners

The modern environmental movement was launched in the early 1960s. Rachel Carson's 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, triggered fears of chemicals. Concern about dirty air was heightened by a London smog disaster that same year and several noteworthy pollution incidents in the United States. Such events increased awareness among the public, elected representatives, and the media of the potential for damaging our surroundings. These forces helped lead to the passage of a host of major federal laws, culminating in the Clean Air Act of 1970 and the Clean Water Act of 1972. These and other federal environmental statutes began to erode traditional private property rights in favor of central government control of property.

People began to think it normal for the government to issue permits to allow the operation of plants and factories. At the same time, Americans also began to abandon their traditional rights to stop pollution nuisances through the courts; this responsibility, too, was largely given over to government regulators. Within ten years there was a regime shift in favor of federal control of environmental matters.

To many people at the time, environmental statutes seemed necessary to correct the problem that economists call "externalities," or costs imposed on others in society, such as using the air and water as free goods. It was not until the late 1980s, when government regulations on wetlands and endan-

gered species began to prevent people from using their property in what seemed to them clearly harmless ways, that the real consequence of federal environmental regulation became obvious.

The result now is substantial restriction on the use of private property. To preserve species such as the red-cockaded woodpecker, for example, many owners of small woodlots cannot log their land. Others cannot plow their land because plowing may endanger the Stephens kangaroo rat. Some are prevented from building homes on their land because it is suddenly declared a wetland, even though it may be dry most of the year. Thus, major attributes of private property have been taken from private property owners and placed under federal regulation.

In response, hundreds of grassroots groups have arisen spontaneously around the country to form the property rights movement, as property owners have come to confront, often for the first time, the effects of direct restrictions on the use of their property. Politicians, sensing the strength of this movement, are proposing that the government compensate property owners for takings that substantially reduce the value of property. Fearing such amendments, supporters of environmental laws that restrict property rights kept numerous environmental laws off the legislative agenda of the 103rd Congress. In their view, it was better to have no new law than one that reduced the impact of laws already on the books. This was a major reason why Congress failed to reauthorize such envi-

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