

Taking it to the trees: A primer on the scope and purpose of environmental adult education

THOUGH ENVIRONMENTAL ADULT EDUCATION (EAE) IS A young field, academically speaking, any examination of the past can serve as a guidepost for the future. Starting with its birth as a unique field of study in the 1970s and proceeding to its more recent coherence as a tool for promoting sustainable living and enacting social change, Haugen (2009) documents environmental adult education as a movement that is both “growing up” and becoming more relevant than ever.

Haugen begins her analysis of the concepts and themes in environmental adult education with the first person to call for it: Lars Emmelin, now a professor at the Swedish Environmental Impact Assessment Centre. In a 1976 paper, Emmelin made a case for both formal and informal environmental adult education: workshops and seminars that would have as much potential to create genuine environmental change as community-oriented activities, such as taking a composting class at a local food co-op, participating in a guided park tour, or attending an environmental protest.

The legitimizing of the EAE movement continued into the 1980s with the publication of several more journal articles and case studies, finally reaching the international stage with the first Earth Summit in 1992. Five years later, environmental adult education, with its focus on the ethical ramifications of stewardship over basic cause-and-effect studies, was recognized by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) as a distinct field of practice, which goes beyond the focus placed on

experiential learning about the environment used in traditional environmental education. Environmental adult education is, essentially, an ideological agreement between the environmental movement and adult education.

As environmentalism became prominent in a global context, EAE practitioners were now suited to address the sociopolitical factors that lead to widespread environmental destruction, a major breaking away from the traditional field of environmental education, which was “not meeting the needs of adult learners” and lacked a holistic view of how humans interact with nature. Thus, Haugen notes, “feminism” and other “indigenous, popular, and nonformal” education philosophies were used to shore up the foundations of environmental adult education in the late 1990s.

Through her historical literature review, Haugen (2009) notes that the basis of environmental adult education can be found earlier in human history. In ancient societies, communal living practices necessitated involvement with and respect for the biosphere, whereas today we may engage in responsible environmental behavior only when convenient or out of guilt. That is to say, environmentalism cannot simply be taught and learned: it must be lived. The author concludes that the constant goal of any environmental adult educator is to strengthen learners’ sense of ecological responsibility, which perhaps has ebbed or disappeared altogether in modern society. Informed of their role, historically and ideologically, active environmental adult educators can more aptly clarify their goals and more passionately convert learners into activists.

In conclusion, environmental adult education is as much about the study of root causes of environmental problems as it is a way to gain the tools to offset them. Through experiential learning processes, a true and lasting appreciation for natural wonders is gained and the basic tenets of environmental stewardship are communicated, values that are both collective and individual.

Reference

Haugen, C. S. 2009. Adult learners and the environment in the last century: An historical analysis of environmental adult education literature. *Electronic Green Journal* 1(29):1–14.

—Jonathan Nawn, Mindi Davis, and Jeff Selleck

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