



The voice for the environment since 1955

Nature Conservation Council of NSW
EDUCATION FOR ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY POLICY
(As endorsed by the Annual Conference, October 2005)

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A. PREAMBLE

This policy has arisen from the requests of member groups and the continued work of the Nature Conservation Council of NSW (NCC). There are many NCC member groups who identify as being primarily environmental educators and also many groups that have an education component to their work. Similarly, many projects undertaken by NCC have community education and awareness as a key component.

The environment movement in NSW has always played an active role in increasing the community's awareness of environmental issues. NCC member groups are either directly or indirectly engaged in educating other NCC members, government, the private sector and the broader community, in ways to achieve an ecologically sustainable NSW. This educational engagement takes many forms and can be through, for example, lobbying, campaigns, workshops, forums, conferences, on-ground works and information provision.

The success of these activities can be measured by the fact that community environmental organisations are considered by the general public as one of the most trusted sources of information on environmental issues (NSW DEC, Who Cares about the Environment in 2003?). As the peak non-government environment organisation in NSW, with over 120 member groups, the NCC is ideally placed to play a major role in environmental education for ecological sustainability.

B. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

This *Policy on Education for Ecological Sustainability (EfES)*:

- Will assist the NCC to work with the NSW community towards ecological sustainability;

- Outlines the important role that education has in assisting the work of NCC and its member groups;
- identifies current principles and practices in environmental education that can be applied to *Education for Ecological Sustainability (EfES)*; and
- recognises that EfES practice in the NCC is continually developing, which will require the policy to be reviewed regularly.

C. DEFINITIONS

The following definitions have been taken from the NSW Council on Environmental Education, *Learning for Sustainability: NSW Environmental Education Plan 2002-05*, (NSW Government, Sydney, 2002).

1.1 *Environmental Education* is defined to mean:

Environmental education is “any process or activity that assists the development of awareness, knowledge, skills and attitudes leading to environmentally responsible practices and behaviour”.

1.2 *Education for sustainability* is defined to mean:

“Processes and activities that are holistic and integrate environmental education that leads to the development of a sustainable society”.

The following definitions are taken from NCC policy.

1.3 *Ecological sustainability* is defined to mean:

“The principles of ecologically sustainable development (ESD) as defined in the NSW Protection of the Environment Administration Act 1991, summarised as:

- The precautionary principle;
- Inter-generational equity;
- Conservation of biodiversity and ecological integrity;
- The improved valuation and pricing of environmental resources.

The NCC Education for Ecological Sustainability Committee has developed the following definition of *Education for ecological sustainability* from the NSW Environmental Education Plan and the NCC definition of Ecological Sustainability

1.4 *Education for ecological sustainability* is defined to mean:

Processes and activities that are holistic and incorporate environmental education into processes that lead to an ecologically sustainable NSW.

D. POLICY

The following policy outline the processes required to implement this across NCC programs, among NCC member groups and the wider community so that NCC can support its mission of an ecologically sustainable NSW.

The NCC is committed to:

- Progressively integrating the principles of Education for Ecological Sustainability (EfES) as a key component of NCC's work towards an ecologically sustainable NSW;
- Developing and promoting practical resources, processes and training to assist NCC staff and member groups by providing the skills, knowledge and understanding necessary to implement EfES principles;
- Developing resources to support the implementation of EfES and to address new programs and new audiences for the NCC;
- Developing and implement EfES programs with the consultation and participation of NCC member groups to increase member groups' capacity to address the complexity of sustainability;
- Assisting member groups to build on their environmental knowledge and develop and utilise appropriate Ecological Sustainability (EfES) strategies in their work with their communities;
- Advocating for Education for Ecological Sustainability on behalf of member groups.

E. CONCEPTS

1. POLICY DEVELOPMENT

This policy was developed by NCC staff, member group representatives and others. Existing NCC planning documents and practices relating to education were identified and drawn upon. Member groups with an interest in education also contributed.

The 2004 Annual Conference of the NCC resolved to develop an education policy with a focus on ecological sustainability. Motion 12 (Annual Conference, 2004) committed NCC to:

- *greater support for Member Groups' education activities;*
- *development of an advocacy role in environmental education issues;*
- *development of projects focused on Ecological Sustainability;*
- *support for the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development;*
- *development of an Education Policy; and*
- *the establishment of an Advisory Committee to guide these tasks.*

2. BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

2.1 International

Chapter 36 of Agenda 21 is dedicated to education, public awareness and training, calling for a reorientation of education towards sustainable development.

“Education is critical for promoting sustainable development and improving the capacity of the people to address environment and development issues..... It is

critical for achieving environmental and ethical awareness, values and attitudes, skills and behaviour consistent with sustainable development and for effective public participation in decision-making.”
(UNCED 1992, Chapter 36, p.2)

At the World Summit for Sustainable Development in 2002 in Johannesburg, governments agreed to “*integrate sustainable development into education systems at all levels of education in order to promote education as a key agent for change.*” (United Nations 2002, as quoted in PCE 2004, p. 37)

Agenda 21 also stated that non-governmental organisations play an independent “vital role in participatory democracy”, help to “develop a sense of common purpose” in society, offer extensive networks with “well-established and diverse experience”, and should foster co-operation both between themselves and with the rest of the community.

2.2 The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development

In recognising the principal role for education in sustainability elaborated in Agenda 21 and the World Summit for Sustainable Development, the United Nations declared a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) commencing in 2005. The Decade is being facilitated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and aims to encourage and support all governments to integrate sustainable development into their national education plans at all levels and all sectors of education. Strategies for doing this include: promoting the concept of Education for Sustainable Development; encouraging international cooperation and sharing innovative policies, programmes and practices in education for sustainable development.

2.3 Australia

As a signatory to Agenda 21, Australia has accepted the imperative to reorient our education systems towards sustainable development¹. The framework for this has been established within a national education for sustainability agenda. The *Environmental Education for a Sustainable Future: National Action Plan* was adopted by the Commonwealth Government in 2000 following the development of a discussion paper, *Today Shapes Tomorrow – Environmental Education for a Sustainable Future*, and consultation process.

The National Action Plan aims to provide leadership to education sectors on environmental education and to be the commencement point for national support for achieving ecologically sustainable development.² It recognises the responsibility of “government, industry, media, educational institutions, community groups – as well as individuals” (p.3) in achieving this goal and that “a holistic appreciation of the context of environmental problems is essential” (p.4). Significantly, despite the emphasis on education for the environment in the Plan, it states that “one of the objectives of environmental education is to develop a fundamental acceptance within

¹ Chapter 36, Para 2 (a), United Nations Council on Environment and Development, 1992

² Commonwealth of Australia, 2000. p.3

the community that the nation's environmental objectives should be accorded the same priority as its social and economic objectives" (p.4).

The Plan's five principles of environmental education are:

- Environmental education must involve everyone;
- Environmental education must be lifelong;
- Environmental education must be holistic and about connections;
- Environmental education must be practical;
- Environmental education must be in harmony with social and economic goals and accorded equal priority. (pp. 3-4)

A non-statutory National Environmental Education Council has been established which provides expert advice to the Australian Government on current approaches and future directions in environmental education.

2.4 New South Wales

NSW is the first Australian State to develop its own environmental education policy through the NSW Council on Environmental Education. *Learning for Sustainability: NSW Environmental Education Plan 2002-2005* approved by the NSW Cabinet in 2002, provides a framework for whole of government and whole of community action in environmental education with the vision to achieve:

"Effective and integrated environmental education which builds the capacity of the people of NSW to be informed and active participants in moving society towards sustainability"

(NSW Council on Environmental Education 2002, p.1).

3. THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN THE NCC

NCC's mission is to protect, conserve and promote the NSW environment. NCC is now thinking more critically about the role and benefit of education in our work and how we can use it to help us achieve our vision of an ecologically sustainable NSW. Environmental Education has played an important role in the activities of NCC's member groups for many years, from awareness raising activities to organisations focused solely on environmental education projects. NCC itself has run many campaigns that have a major education focus – most recently *Cool Communities* and *Community Bushfire Education*. The resolution at the 2004 Annual Conference confirms the role of education in working towards the NCC vision.

Education is recognized and used around the world as a tool for change towards sustainability. This change can take place on a number of levels including, the individual, organisational, whole-of community and in the political arena. As such, it plays a role in all of our environmental campaigns regardless of their size and scope.

4. PRINCIPLES

There are several principles, acknowledged by education professionals in the health, arts, environment, and community development fields as key for achieving effective change-focused education projects. These principles have been used to guide education programs run by the NCC in the past. These principles are intended to apply to NCC's work through its core operations; relationships with members and member groups; and the broader community. These principles are not exhaustive but make up the core of the style of education that will help achieve Ecological Sustainability

4.1 Environmental education must involve everyone:

Partnerships (working together) – sharing our visions for sustainability by exchanging information and tools for education between member groups and with other organizations and working with communities to assist them to identify and resolve the issues;

Participation – advocating for and implementing a culture of participation in framing issues, problems and solutions, leading to better and more inclusive decision-making processes and planning;

Ownership – Education for Ecological Sustainability (EfES) processes foster ownership by groups to have input into the methods and content of education and educational materials used within the NCC.

4.2 Environmental education must be life-long:

Critical thinking – facilitating reflection on values and attitudes that impact on the environment;

Values – developing positive values towards the environment through education that provides opportunities to experience, learn about and advocate for ecological sustainability;

Recognising existing knowledge and values – a process which recognises and acknowledges existing knowledge and strengths, and supports and encourages learning.

4.3 Environmental education must be holistic and about connections:

Futures thinking – applying a futures focused approach by encouraging NCC, its members, and their communities to identify what their desired futures are in ecological sustainability, in order to work towards them. This requires an understanding of the state of past and present ecosystems at both state wide and community levels;

Holistic thinking – Encouraging and assisting NCC, its members & audiences to apply a holistic approach to thinking about and reflecting on ecological sustainability in the context of their daily work and life;

Complex connections – recognising the diversity of issues and approaches in ecological sustainability.

4.4 Environmental education must be practical:

Skills building – assisting and facilitating the development of the skills necessary to address ecological sustainability, to act sustainably, and create projects that will also be sustainable;

Integration – ensuring that practical educational approaches are integrated with other key tools for change toward ecological sustainability, so that planning, operations and campaigns include an educational component and a wide range of educational tools are available to member groups;

Ecological knowledge – Education for Ecological Sustainability (EfES) can contribute to and be based upon practical skills that foster ecological knowledge-based approaches.

4.5 Environmental education must be in harmony with social and ecological goals and accorded equal priority:

Connections – linking ecological sustainability to other aspects of sustainability to ensure a holistic understanding of issues;

Social Change – ensuring as far as possible, that education for ecological sustainability also promotes change towards social sustainability;

Ecological Outcomes – using education as a vehicle to work towards a more ecologically sustainable NSW.