

Building Multi-culturalism as a Framework for Ethnic Environmental Participation

A community can be sustainable only if all its members have equal opportunities to participate fully in the life of the community. Within the environmental arena, the vast missing contribution from ethnic communities is a significant loss to the environment.

In many cities, ethnic minorities make up a significant proportion of the local population. Indeed in some areas they are destined to become the majority in numbers. Yet often they remain absent within activities which determine the character of the immediate local environment.

Within the majority population there needs to be a consciousness of aspects of multi-culturalism leading to the perception that ethnic persons are fully British in the context of a multi-cultural society.

The history of humankind is the history of mutual influence, each taking from the other. There is no such thing as a unique culture. If there is one, we do not know it, because as soon as it is known it begins to change through mutual impact. One can say that there is a unique culture in a sense at a point in time as a 'unique combination of multi-cultural elements.' A good example are the English.

Once upon a time, unique cultures emerged through isolation when humankind could not traverse a mountain or cross the sea. Particular aspects of human potential were drawn out through interaction with particular environmental circumstances. In a sense what we see as different cultures show us the full range of the human personality - in all its glory as well as in all its awfulness. It is there for all of us to claim as what all of us can be. It is all ours. It is a great lesson.

Within Britain, beyond the first immigrant generation all ethnic persons are bi-cultural if not multi-cultural. Their ethnic cultural status stands alongside their British status. They need to claim Britain as their own and participate fully in order to shape Britain as of right. The native British landscape is also their landscape.

They have a special relationship to the world beyond Britain due to their personal histories, a special association with particular cultures.

Because of the above, they are naturally global people if can we create the conditions in which these aspects can be seen as positive attributes and therefore flourish. If they can be enabled to see themselves as such, they will be some of the most significant people with the motivation to take part in what is an increasingly interdependent world - people for whom 'thinking globally and acting locally' is a personal fact.

Into the future

With the present momentum for Local Agenda 21, it is timely to focus on reaching out to socially excluded groups, including ethnic communities. Here I would like to highlight two major areas:

1. The multi-cultural interpretation of the environment.
2. The creation of opportunities for environmental participation by ethnic communities as an integral part of the work programmes of environmental agencies.

The multi-cultural interpretation of landscape

A vital sense of belonging and ownership of the environment at large is a basic building block for the care of the environment. Much can be achieved through the multi-cultural interpretation of landscape.

Landscape, people and culture are constantly evolving quantities. They are also inter-related, especially in the small islands of the British Isles. Here, since centuries past, manipulation of the landscape has been essential to the livelihood of people. Waves of invasions and migration brought new people here. Trade brought about inter-continental exchange of elements of value, including plants. These served to provide sources of food, medicine, building materials and fuel, and as ornamentation. All this leads to the landscape being the result of the processes of nature as well as multi-cultural human activity. The landscape is therefore a multi-cultural landscape.

Many parts of the landscape of Britain express multi-cultural associations, but much of this remains an unknown quantity. The exploration of the landscape of Britain as a multi-cultural landscape and the active participation in its care, protection and development can do much to confirm many aspects of the identities of ethnic persons if we can provide information and alternative frameworks for experiencing it.

At the present time, multi-cultural elements are not conveyed as part and parcel of the British landscape. There is a whole new field of work to be done with regard to the research and expression of the multi-cultural fact of Britain's landscape.

There is a growing consciousness that a shift in thinking needs to take place, away from a mono-culturally exclusive interpretation and management of British landscape, in order to make landscape interpretation relevant to the British contemporary multi-cultural society.

In too many cases, the normal consequence of the historical recent arrivals of present day ethnic British citizens and their desired manipulations of the landscape are seen, not as part of the normal components of present day culture, but intrusions into a mythical unique and continuous culture that is deemed to be valuable in the context of a manipulated illusional non-changingness.

Within a world which increasingly recognises that we need to work together and that we are interdependent and part of each other, such attitudes of division are counter-productive. We need to embrace the idea of being a multi-cultural Britain, of being part of Europe, and moving beyond that, being part of one world.

Opportunities for participation

Within environmental agencies which pledge to be open to everyone, understanding and commitment at senior level regarding ethnic community environmental participation still needs to be built. They need to address:

1. The recognition of the energies and talents yet to be unlocked from ethnic communities.
2. The right to access to environmental participation by ethnic communities in terms of the enjoyment of the environment and opportunities to contribute to the preservation, protection and development of the environment.
3. The benefit to ethnic communities and the vast contribution to the environment by ethnic communities which go hand in hand with ethnic community environmental participation.

The following need to be integral to the work programme of environmental agencies:

1. Outreach to ethnic communities.
2. Training of staff so they can work with awareness and effectively with ethnic communities.
3. Multi-cultural interpretation of the environment.
4. Facilitation of access by ethnic communities to information, resources and opportunities for environmental participation.
5. Identification of the specific contribution particular cultural groups can make, and the forging of a new range of cultural-environmental projects.

Ethnic communities centre stage

Historically the Rio Summit highlighted the fact that we live on a small planet with a fragile natural system wavering under the overwhelming global impact of mass human actions. The equation is about people and the environment across the world. We can no longer hope to secure our future by turning inwards to seek simply local solutions to our local patch.

As a contemporary theme, local/global environmental action is crucial to the care of the planet Earth, our only home. Here, we can put ethnic communities centre stage. British ethnic communities are a continuation of the major cultures and peoples of the world. What better way to initiate multi-cultural environmental action than to begin at home!

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