

People and Environment in Multi-cultural Britain

Environmental concern is an issue for all communities. This article explores some perspectives which determine whether we make an effort to involve ourselves with reaching out and working with ethnic communities, and how these shape the way we may see ourselves in relation to different cultures. It draws on the work of the Black Environment Network and gives some examples of environmental projects with multi-cultural themes.

The Black Environment Network

The Black Environment Network (BEN) is a multi-racial organisation that works to enable the missing contribution of black and ethnic minority communities to come forward in environmental work. BEN works towards enabling ethnic minority participation through concentrating on positive opportunities which contributes towards creating a climate in which participation can take place. Of course directly fighting racism and discrimination is an important area to tackle, but there are already organisations dealing with these issues. BEN has chosen to identify important avenues for active change around the environmental theme which play a part in completing the picture.

These include:

- ¥ Building up understanding of the significance of multi-culturalism as a force within the environmental movement.
- ¥ Highlighting the missing positive contribution ethnic minorities are yet to make as part of the mainstream.
- ¥ Recognising the goodwill in the mainstream population and training interested personnel who do not have the necessary awareness and skills to take on the initiative of reaching out and working with ethnic communities.
- ¥ Getting the involvement of ethnic minorities onto the mainstream agenda, a mainstream whose organisations claim to be open to all.
- ¥ Creating a vision for involvement through listening to the situation and bringing together relevant observations which challenge attitudes and stimulate discussion, leading to action and change.

The use of the term 'black' in our name is symbolic and is used to describe the common experience of all ethnic minority communities, including the less visible white minority communities such as the Polish, Greek Cypriots or the Irish. BEN provides support and advice to black organisations and individuals who are newcomers to environmental work. But equally important, we also work to fulfil the needs of many mainstream environmental organisations who want to ensure that their practices welcome the whole population. A major contribution from BEN is the recognition that many people of goodwill in the mainstream need help too. The enabling has to work from two directions for the co-operation to happen. BEN is not about separating off ethnic communities, but about being a catalyst for opening up the environmental movement so that ethnic communities can make their enormous missing contribution.

In our work, we have found that it is not enough to stimulate participation by ethnic communities, but that the enabling is just as much about making it possible for personnel from environmental organisations to acquire the skills and awareness to work with different cultures. After all, if you were the only project worker going out to visit an ethnic minority group, being the only white person, the position is suddenly reversed - you may find yourself having the intimidating experience of feeling that you are now the ethnic minority person among a group of people who share views and ways that you do not fully understand. Within a training workshop this experience can be used to gain extremely useful understanding of and identification with the experience of ethnic minorities.

The nature of this distressing, isolating, and disorientating experience is such that it can be entirely disabling, leaving a mark that plays a role in the lack of confidence to participate in the mainstream. Such experiences not only apply to new arrivals, but might be a typical experience of a small child's first entry into the world of going to school, leaving behind the familiar and different small circles of the immediate family and friends of early life. BEN will support Kid's clubs or holiday playschemes considering starting up environmental activities or projects, offering advice on how to draw the wider community into such work and how green activity can best reflect the multiracial, multi-ethnic aspects of their club or scheme and the local community. A multi-cultural setting, for example having a cultural garden, or painting together a mural showing plants and animals from all over the world, helps towards creating an atmosphere of inclusion and acceptance which is important to the development of a child as a member of the community.

BEN runs the Ethnic Minorities Award Scheme (EMAS) to support projects that are creative and which relate to the needs and aspirations of ethnic minority communities and groups who were formerly perceived as being uninterested in the environment. EMAS is more than just a 'grants' scheme. It is direct action to increase participation by ethnic minority communities in environmental activity and join the mainstream environmental movement. It highlights the missing contribution of ethnic communities and gives their presence an accent. It uncovers a new range of project types, enriching the mainstream project range, and demonstrates the significance of particular ways of working and thinking.

Multi-culturalism - a transformed view of people and landscape

BEN works in many directions to bring forward a missing contribution that is potentially huge but more than that, integrational projects are a beginning in creating a setting for a global awareness that contributes to the survival of our only home - the care of the environment that is the whole earth.

For all of us to work together effectively, there must be created a climate within which participation can take place. It works in two directions. Firstly, that ethnic communities here will participate naturally, with a sense of belonging within the setting of Britain. Secondly, that through this experience, the British mainstream population will also work within a different vision, not one just about bettering the British environment, but seeing Britain as a part of the evolving earth, in continuity through history and landscape.

One can draw parallels between the concept of multi-culturalism and the importance of respect for habitats within the continuity of a wider ecosystem. One of the misinterpretations of multi-culturalism as a concept is that it means the erosion of unique cultures, whereas the central idea of multi-culturalism is uniqueness. Multi-culturalism is about diversity and its unity in diversity, just as biodiversity has come to be recognised as crucial within the interacting ecosystem. Interaction also continues to create new systems which are also symbiotically unique.

Defining multi-culturalism in this way is something that environmentalists should find easy to take on as a constructive and productive concept, because the valuing of habitats is about recognising the importance of encouraging the diversity of unique combinations in nature. A unique culture is the parallel to a unique habitat, a system in which dependent relationships support and enable the survival of the whole. Like habitats, cultures are not fixed frameworks but are evolving, moving at a possible pace through the impact of historical change. What is important is to be able to see that the landscape is not a static quality with features which call for rigid resistance against change, as if there is a static identity in time that is valuable in an isolated and nationalist way that is discontinuous with neighbouring features of nature. Rather it is constantly shifting, with identifiable systems in points of time. This viewpoint confirms that basic global unity of nature across the world, and enables us to maintain a global/local vision in participating in the care of nature in the way we live.

At various times isolated national, regional and local labels are plastered onto the landscape and its elements. For example at the present time there are the unfortunate labels of native species and alien species, prone to being used in ways that echo the language of racism. Looking at the history of these labels reveals their artificiality. Nature is itself. If such labels were to be taken seriously, plants, like people, would seem unreasonably to change nationalities, or would have no rights to migrate. Some seem to integrate only due to having been defined as alien in the first place. The evolution of the landscape may then be distorted due to groups of fauna and flora (for example, through the simplistic use of the label of native or alien) being arbitrarily encouraged to flourish or rejected and crushed out. Buddleia, the renowned butterfly bush, that is now on every list of desirable native British plants, came originally from China.

There has been a wave of the highlighting of 'bad alien plants' which has created an atmosphere which seems to foster a popular notion that all non-native plants are a threat. A lot of this is due to the neglect of explaining clearly the scientific basis for the attack on one particular Rhododendron, an invasive imported plant. Alongside the justified eradication of this plant should also be highlighted the same problem with a native invasive plant, the notorious bracken, which poisons every plant in its path by secreting toxins and threatens to take over the landscape. Not all native plants are 'good' plants, just as there are 'good' imported plants which finally, such as Buddleia, become part of and contribute to an evolving world of flora and fauna. Further terms used in the environmental movement are equally emotive, 'Rhodo-bashing' almost echoing 'Paki-bashing'. For young children, the simplistic proposition of encouraging 'good native species' and rejecting and uprooting 'bad alien' species finds an echo in their insecurity.

Most pocket guides to common trees found in Britain start by pointing out that less than 10% of these are truly British! What does it all mean when alongside such information there is the current pervasive idea put forward by environmental agencies that if we do plant trees we should consider planting native trees. With the recognition of Britain as a strongly multi-cultural society, one needs to address the need, alongside such simplistic instruction, of explaining the full context of the movement of plants. This is especially true within schools, many using nature gardens as a teaching tool, and obtaining expert advice from local environmental organisations which give them lists of solely native plants. It is important to emphasise the central idea of the global evolving nature of landscape itself, in which one sees the present landscape in Britain as where it is now, different from what it was through the centuries and evolving into the future.

Nature has no respect for national boundaries but is about global aspects. The trees of Britain find continuity beyond its national shores. What is a native tree?

At the height of the last ice age, as little as 20,000 years ago, there were probably no full sized trees in the British Isles, at least north of a line drawn from today's London to Bristol. As the climate became warmer in about 9000 BC, the tree belts migrated northwards onto the area we now call England, still continuous as a landmass with what we now call Europe separately.

Vast barrenness was once here as an identity. Countless habitats, species of flora and fauna have come and gone. Dinosaurs and other wonderful yet undiscovered creatures which used to walk upon this earth have disappeared. Plants and trees came and went. Many communities arrived, lived and fought here, to produce, so recently in history, a multi-cultural group of people, a newly unique cultural group who now choose to call themselves English. We and what is here now are the picture of landscape and people, evolving too.

A world within Britain

Young people are growing up in a multi-cultural Britain. What does this mean? In this article we can begin to think about some of the relevant aspects. Everyone working in the environment must take responsibility for building a setting for the development of how young people may end up seeing the world. The people whom we call 'ethnic minorities' in Britain are simply the continuity of the different peoples living upon this earth, people who are, in fact, representatives of the majority cultures of the world. They are 'the world within Britain.'

Different cultures offer unique perspectives on environmental issues. These enrich and widen our thinking, contributing to the building up of an ever more relevant and global vision of nature and environment. The environmental movement, especially since the Rio summit, has come to realise that it can only be a global movement in order to be truly effective in the care of our only home - planet Earth. This doorstep accessibility to the world, our 'world within Britain' is a vital and exciting opportunity within the present preoccupation of 'thinking globally and acting locally.' Growing up in a setting in which different cultures are expressed, developing within an atmosphere of being world citizens, feeling in contact with the world, are all vital strands in the web of the care of the world environment. Some day from our localities may come the essential individuals who have grown up with living skills for working cross-culturally, who may become our representatives on the world stage, thinking and working with awareness in their negotiations with the nations of the world for our future.

Cultural visions and global/local themes

A little school called Bingley Woods First School is set in a rural area with an all white population. One of their teachers had the extraordinary foresight to realise that multi-culturalism as an experience was even more important where ethnic minorities are not present! She recognised that talking about it was not enough and wanted the children to grow up with a real understanding of different cultures. The answer she found was to twin the school with one which had an ethnic minority component. The children spent days in each others' school, and continuing friendships make a multi-cultural world a true experience. Twinning is a concept that will increasingly play a role within the global/local setting. It can be designed to break down cultural barriers, and urban/rural barriers. For rural groups, it may be a doorway to the world. For urban groups, it may be an important experience of being in contact with nature at large.

If we look back far enough, we can see that different ways of life and the growth of systems of looking at the world arose because of environmental isolation. Natural barriers such as rivers too wide or too

violent to cross, mountains, the sea, stretches of hostile barren land such as deserts separated groups of people who then developed different cultures. When new skills were learnt which enabled travel further afield, cultures were linked, so that those geographically closer influenced each other. In many ways, looked at with such a perspective one can ponder upon the diversity of cultural solutions to life and environment as a spectrum illustrating the potential of the human personality itself. Can we embrace this and take on the excitement of a discovery of aspects of ourselves through contact with different cultures?

The contemporary world and the contemporary environmental movement has rightly recognised that we all have only one home - planet Earth. It is not all that big, and all that lives and grows on it are interacting each second of the day. As the sun sets each day, we realise that the same sun that was shining on us today is moving on to shine on the other peoples on this planet while we sleep and that when it returns to us the next morning, it has given something of itself to each and every man, woman, and child on this planet. All of us share everything on the planet. Its oceans are linked, the clouds drift and rain across continents, huge seas edge numerous countries, birds migrate - African birds are British birds too.

It is an exciting opportunity and an essential one to take up the work of involving ethnic communities in our lives and in our work. The ethnic communities of the UK are a gateway for us to the world. All of us can become part of a continuous fabric with the populations and cultures of the world. If we wish to truly be a global movement, as we so dearly need to be, we need to be able to understand and work together harmoniously with the different peoples of this planet. If we create a vital atmosphere of globalism locally, so that when we plant a tree in a local street we are also conscious that we are planting a tree on the earth and link ourselves to the love and care of trees all over the world, we are not only building a climate in which participation by all can take place, we are also building within local communities something very vital to all our futures - perhaps if we can grow up side by side with different cultures and learn naturally how to work cross-culturally, we can look forward to co-operate successfully and work towards a co-ordinated plan for the survival of our only home - planet earth. Working in this wide context not only gives us cross-cultural skills, and widens our vision, it also makes our emotions vitally linked to those seemingly faraway events we see on television immediate and compelling. One may see the floods in Bangladesh on the news, but it is a different matter altogether if you knew a Bangladeshi family and you could hear them cry.

Many of our drives to involve ourselves in issues stem from our emotions, and therefore from our human relationships. From working together in teams on environmental projects, from friendships and the natural widening knowledge that comes from that also comes a natural widening and relevance of wider environmental concerns - being global and local is a natural development of being in contact with ethnic communities in the UK. Being in contact with ethnic minorities is being emotionally and motivationally tuned into the state of the earth. Human action through national economics, international trade structures, industrial practices and so on all impact on nature and inescapably on individual human happiness in the end. The necessary change depends on large numbers of people being moved to shape alternative action. We must come to realise that even thinking about wanting something has power. Even if we are not the vehicle for direct action, our public opinion can be the essential pressure for change. Young people are building up a basic awareness that is the foundation for playing a role in the world. We are here to provide a setting for their development.

Local initiatives

A national movement is only the sum total of what is taking place locally. It is the action of local people that is all important. Many local initiatives have been set up to involve ethnic communities in environmental work. The BEN Local Initiatives Network initiatives include formal groups with members from the local authorities, environmental organisations, community groups, schools and interested individuals, but some initiatives are single workers in particular services, for example, the youth service, the planning department of a local authority, a teacher, whoever wishes to take on the work in a wide way or within a more restricted area, for example someone in the youth service wishing only to work with young people, and only with those who are immediately in contact, bringing in others only when it seems appropriate.

Access to the Countryside

One of the biggest categories of projects funded by EMAS has been access to the countryside through trips and visits - EMAS receives a grant from the Countryside Commission specifically to make awards to groups for this purpose.

Countryside visits are important for a number of reasons, and as well as being an enjoyable outing for all involved, can bring special benefits to ethnic communities, and be the springboard for further environmental involvement. For children of ethnic minority communities which once lived in rural environments a visit can bring a greater understanding and appreciation of the closeness to nature which was once their parents' and grandparents' experience. Countryside visits are also a recreation enjoyed by millions and should be equally accessible to all communities in Britain.

Millions of pounds of every worker's tax go into the maintenance of the countryside. Many low-paid families are contributing to the care of a wonderful facility which they never have the money to consistently see and enjoy. Through organising a countryside trip a club or scheme can open up accessibility which might not otherwise be available to a child through their family, because of lack of transport or money, unsocial hours worked by the wage-earner or lack of confidence to make the first steps to 'venture into the unknown'. The child's experience of the countryside can, in turn, help their family and community to feel more at ease about making visits themselves. Barriers to visiting the countryside are also faced by other groups with much in common with ethnic minority groups, so organising a trip can be of huge benefit to your club or scheme as a whole, making the countryside more accessible to more people in your local community.

The countryside experience lays down the essential basis for participation in the environmental movement. If one has never experienced nature at large how can one imagine caring for it? It is the love and enjoyment of the countryside which leads one to wish to care for plants and wildlife. For ethnic communities it also provides a feeling of ownership and belonging. At present, connected with concern for laying down a basis for participation is the fact that 80% of our population live in urban areas, and a major issue is the lack of contact with nature for those growing up in urban areas. Allied to countryside visits is the need for urban environmental projects which provide contact with nature and raise awareness about environmental issues where people live their lives.

As a natural development, following a trip, groups are often inspired to transform their immediate urban surroundings because they want to remain in contact with nature, which gave so much pleasure and a feeling of well being. As a strategy for further participation and empowerment of groups to change their environment, clubs and organisations can play an essential role in encouraging further projects, mixing fun with raising awareness, and practical improvements. As groups grow with their first projects, they learn all the basics which newcomers do - teamwork, budgeting, designing possible projects, fundraising, clarifying aims and beginning to aim high!

The cultural garden

The cultural ecological garden is a good example of a practical project which creates a multi-cultural resource. The cultural garden has had perhaps the greatest impact on the imagination of groups coming to EMAS, involving the cultivation of plants from around the world. This is not about the introduction of foreign species new to the UK. Plants from all over the world already surround us. EMAS produces a list of plants that can be used, with the exact botanical names of each plant so participants can order them from their local plant centre. They are plants which are already here in the 'English' garden, and are readily available.

The cultural garden is really an exercise in recognition. For example the EMAS Far Eastern and African garden in a London school contains plants from the Far East on the same latitude as England, some of which are very common in British gardens. Children are delighted to see the recognition of their origin in the surroundings in which they grow up. All of a sudden the realisation hits them, children come back to school saying - there are Chinese plants in my garden! They feel then that aspects of their origin have 'always' been here, accepted, included and loved for their beauty for a long time.

A setting of inclusion is a setting for positive child development. Here the cultural garden plays an important role. Many community centres have also planted cultural gardens. Others have consciously incorporated a mix of cultural elements and other native English species which demonstrate ecosystems and plant types so that the springboard of interest and excitement of inclusion is carried over into further interest and education, thereby laying down the ground for further involvement and understanding of nature. The experience of BEN is that many projects wish to combine elements which include the environment, play, social aspects, health and the arts.

Projects using the arts

The arts are invaluable because they give an inspired understanding of a theme as opposed to a logical one. An understanding that involves heart and soul can spur one on to make the efforts often needed to gain an elaborate and necessary understanding of the subject one has begun to love. The arts awaken our senses and sharpen them. They make us critical of our surroundings, and urge action. Have we not become far too accommodating, far too adaptable to awful environments. Arts projects are fun. They make us feel rightly alive. EMAS projects using the arts have included: study projects leading to a rural on an endangered species; play involving nature or recycled material; study/design projects, sometimes employing an artist using batik, a carpenter to take on the more complicated aspects of creating play sculpture of endangered species, a dance project with the them wildlife in the city... One good example of a mural is at Hockley Flyover adventure playground in Birmingham, painted on the play building by children during a summer playscheme, with the theme of 'animals and plants from around the world'. This had a particular focus on the backgrounds of children in the local area. Not only did the project enhance the play building of the scheme, raise ecological awareness and involve many children, it also led to a sense of ownership and belonging and the disappearance of vandalism to the play building. It was certainly a meaningful social exercise on top of the achievement of raising awareness about nature conservation. And the mural is there for everyone to enjoy for years to come.

One People, One Earth

In conclusion, organisations may wish to become part of the movement to work with ethnic minorities and consider the following points of good practice:

1. Adopt an equal opportunities policy and ensure that members of your organisation have the awareness and skills to reach out and work with ethnic minority communities through the provision of training workshops. It is now fashionable to employ the one ethnic minority worker in an organisation. Of course it is right that if ethnic minority people are present in the community, they should be seen to be employed in all organisations. But, many organisations mistakenly believe that an ethnic minority person has a magical skill to deal with all other cultures. A Chinese person is no more knowledgeable about an Arabic culture than a white British person. We all need training to work effectively cross-culturally. Only by opening up our organisations 100% to these skills can ethnic communities receive the full range of services as everyone else.
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2. Provision of a setting that is inclusive. This may include key information in other languages, or pictures and posters on the walls illustrating ethnic minority presence or participation.
3. Organise activities which are multi-ethnic, creating opportunities to share different cultures and understanding through contact.
4. Be aware of grant opportunities and opportunities for access to information and resources (this can include translation facilities, or information about which libraries have exhibitions based on different cultural festivals, which one can borrow for example).
5. Network and share experience and information. A short cut to how not to re-invent the wheel!

Involving ethnic communities and recognising the richness of sharing different cultures - working for multi-culturalism - is about insuring all our futures. Care of the environment has focused our minds on the importance of creating a setting for participation by everyone. We all need each other's contributions to care for the earth, working on particular issues but conscious of the role of that focus in a very large picture. Only then are our efforts truly co-operative, relevant and effective, part of a web that vibrates with the same rhythm - one people with all its diverse aspects on one earth with all its glorious diverse aspects.

Written for 'Youth and Policy' Durham University