

Some have called it "Eco-Kid Power", while to others it is the "Newest Parental Nightmare." The latest craze sweeping this nation's youth is environmental consciousness, due in no small part to the spread of ecological issues into the classroom. This movement has reached almost every school district in the nation, as children are increasingly taught the importance of being green.

More Pennsylvania high school students are taking environmental education classes than physics. Even the federal government is actively involved. In 1990 President Bush signed the National Environmental Education Act, appropriating \$65 million over five years to set up in the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) an Office of Environmental Education that serves as a clearinghouse for green educational materials.

Most classroom environmental information, including most that is listed at the EPA clearinghouse, comes from literature and teaching guides drafted and distributed by the major environmental groups. These materials include everything from the World Wildlife Fund's "Vanishing Rain Forests Education Kit" and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation's "What I Can Do To Save the Bay," to the acid rain Foundation's curriculum, "Air Pollutants and Trees," and the Sierra Club educational newsletter, "Sierraecology." Similar material is targeted to children at home, including "50 Simple Things Kids Can Do to Save the Earth,"

which has sold nearly a million copies, and TV's popular "Captain Planet and the Planet Patrol," not to mention the recent feature-length film "Fermi Gully... The Last Rainforest."

It is entirely appropriate for children to learn about the environment. Indeed, any comprehensive science programme for primary and secondary schools ought to include discussions of the food chain, the life cycles of various species, and the fundamentals of meteorology. Using nature trails and camping in the wilderness can be valuable educational experiences, particularly if children are taught to understand what they are seeing. Unfortunately, much of what is taught to children is simple-minded and inaccurate. Among the growing environmental disinformation spread through the classroom are 10 myths that give children an incomplete understanding of environmental issues.

#### 1: Recycling is Always Good

The recycling craze has America's schools. From coast to coast, children are organizing recycling programs in their schools and neighborhoods, separating their trash, and sending bottles, cans, newspapers, and yard waste to their local recycling centers. Various environmental groups, as well as the EPA through its "Recycle Today!" campaign, actively promote recycling as a means to "help stamp out the Garbage Gremlin." Animated characters such

as Henry Cycle and Captain Planet sell the practice to elementary school children.

In one guide for parents and educators—"This Planet Is Mine"—Mary Metzger and Cynthia Whittaker claim that recycling is "by far the most commonsensical and energy-saving waste reduction technique." This sentiment is echoed in the EPA's Let's Reduce and Recycle: Curriculum for Solid Waste Awareness, where children in grades K-6 are told that recycling reduces pollution and saves natural resources, energy, money, and landfill space.

While recycling is often a sensible means of disposing solid waste, it is not so clear that recycling is always of

benefit to the planet. Aluminum cans have been profitably recycled for years—indeed companies actually pay for used cans—because recycling aluminum costs less energy and money than does producing cans from virgin materials. Yet this may be the exception rather than the rule. Although recycled paper can be used for newspaper, ledger paper, and cardboard boxes, it is inappropriate for paper products that require the greater strength of unrecycled paper, as the fibers tend to deteriorate during the recycling process. The bleaching of recycled paper causes more water pollution than bleaching paper from virgin pulp. Even when materials are collected for recycling, they are often not used for that purpose. In Islip, New York, there are mountains of tinted glass from bottles collected for recycling, and in the nation's capital newspapers intended for recycling sit rotting in warehouses.

Children were told during a CBS "Schoolbreak Special" that "recycling paper saves trees," and that if all paper were recycled it would save 500,000 trees per week. However, 87 percent of all paper in the United States is produced from trees planted and grown for that purpose by the paper industry. Were there less of a market for unrecycled paper products, the incentive to plant more trees would likely shrink as well. Thus, is recycling really a policy that serves to save trees? Or, may it actually reverse the current trend of growth of America's forests? Roger Sedjo of Resources for the Future, an environmental think tank, points out that there has been a steady increase in US forestland for the past 40 years, and profit-seeking firms are planting, growing, and harvesting forests on an unprecedented scale. The existence of vibrant markets for virgin wood materials has encouraged this growth.

### By Jonathan H. Adler

# Environmental education for 'eco-smart' children

What is more, it is not clear that recycling is always the "environmentally" preferable disposal option for solid waste. Cleaning cloth diapers, for example, may at first glance less wasteful than throwing out disposables, but collection and sterilization requires massive amounts of water, energy (for heat and transportation), and detergent, not to mention the additional time spent in cleaning. If recycling requires increased consumption of energy, it may not result in the net saving of resources that environmentalists desire.

#### 2: Plastic is Bad

Plastic has reached the top of the "evil kid enemies" list. Among the "55 fun ways kids can make a difference" listed in Michael O'Brian's "I Helped Save the Earth" are: "Use paper, not plastic," "Don't buy drinks in plastic containers," and "Buy things packaged in cardboard, not plastic." "50 Simple Things Kids Do To Save the Earth" calls upon all children to "Stamp out Styrofoam" because "using Styrofoam means using up precious resources... and adding more garbage to our world." It further asserts that "plastic foam is often made with chemicals that make the ozone hole bigger!" One New York mother told the "New York Times" that her 12-year-old son's antiplastic sentiments are so vehement that "If something is in plastic, I have to hide it if I want to use it." This message has apparently had a significant ef-

fect. In Closter, New Jersey, the elementary-school group Kids Against Pollution (KAP) has been credited with successfully promoting a ban on foam containers in their community, and was very active in pressuring McDonald's to abandon its polystyrene "clamshell" containers.

One reason plastics are attacked is that they are often difficult to recycle. In addition, plastics are generally not biodegradable, and perhaps most important, other than being "natural," are produced synthetically from man-made chemicals. Thus, the use of plastic is viewed as an inevitable source of pollution and an unnecessary contribution to the solid waste stream.

Because they are rarely recycled, most plastic products eventually find their way into a landfill. The greatest environmental concern raised by the use of landfills is the possibility that toxic wastes will seep into the local groundwater. Yet plastics are typically inert, and therefore they are certain not to decompose. The stable state of plastics—their non-biodegradability—is a protection for human health when they are deposited in landfills.

Of course, many kids are upset by the notion that plastics placed by people in the earth today will remain there for centuries. But while plastic does not degrade in a landfill, rarely does anything else either. As the research of William Rathje at the University of Arizona has shown, in landfills, even newspapers fail to biodegrade for decades.