

27 MAY 1996

The Bangladesh Times

Environmental education for 'eco-smart' children

By Jonathan H. Adler

Another source of air pollution that is often overlooked is the natural environment. While air pollution is almost always blamed upon human activity, in some areas most of the pollution comes from natural sources. Particularly acute in some areas is the emission of methane and other volatile organic compounds—a primary component in the formation of smog—from plants and animals. In addition, the topography of some areas makes them natural air-pollution traps. As a result, cities located in valleys or depressions, such as Los Angeles, often suffer from greater pollution than those areas where there may actually be greater levels of emissions.

9: Global warming will kill us all

Topping the list of environmental concerns these days is the threat of global warming. Increasing concentrations of carbon dioxide, methane, and other greenhouse gases, it is argued, will cause an irreversible change in the earth's climate by increasing average world temperatures by several degrees. Thus it should be no surprise that discussions of global warming have become very prominent in the classroom. BEAT THE HEAT: THE CO₂ CHALLENGE, distributed to teachers by Scholastic, Inc., charges that "the world is hotter today than any time

in recorded history" but fails to acknowledge that the "recorded history" of accurate temperatures barely extends back 100 years.

In "The Greenhouse Effect: Life on a Warmer Planet," an educational text for grades 5 and up-praised by the "School Library Journal" as "a book that is especially noteworthy for its calm balanced approach to a timely topic"—children are told:

"It's frightening to think about the world's food reserves dwindling away or entire islands disappearing under rising seas. Yet this is what scientists predict our world could be like in the next century if greenhouse gases continue to build up in the atmosphere."

Following the initial broadcast on PBS of "After the Warming," the show's producer, Maryland Public Television, drafted a teachers manual as if the programme—which chronicled the "history" of environmental degradation to the year 2050 was based upon fact, rather than exaggerated assumptions and unfounded conjecture. The TBS children's special "One Child-One Voice" claimed that the greenhouse effect could increase temperatures by as much as 5 or 6 degrees. The American Museum of Natural History in conjunc-

tion with the National Science Foundation and the Environmental Defense Fund, is promoting a series of educational activities and programmes based upon its exhibit "Global Warming: Understanding the Forecast." Educational books like "50 Simple Things" tell children that with the greenhouse effect "places that are warm would become too hot to live in, and...the places that grow

warm up, the higher temperatures could well be beneficial. There is much research to show that plants would thrive in a carbon-dioxide enriched atmosphere, and that a slightly warmer climate would create a healthier planet. Agricultural experts point out that because carbon dioxide acts as a fertilizer for most plants, increasing concentrations of carbon dioxide will increase agricultural productivity. Also most of the recorded temperature increases in recent years have occurred at night, meaning smaller swings between night and day temperatures, and thus, fewer killing frosts.

Any serious effort to reduce the claimed threat of warming through a massive reduction of greenhouse gas emissions would have drastic economic consequences. One recent study by the Department of Energy projects that reducing car-

bon dioxide emissions to only 20 percent below 1990 levels would cost as much as \$95 billion each year—and for many environmental advocates, such reductions are only the first step. When massive expenditures are forcibly directed toward averting global warming, fewer resources are available for use in other sectors of the economy, from nutrition and education to health care and housing. As Richard Stroup of the Political Economy Research Center testified before Congress's Joint "Economic Committee," "If insurance against a particular risk, such as the threat of global warming, is bought at the cost of reduced economic growth then a decline in the automatic insurance represented by wealth, and the social resilience it provides, is one of the costs borne by future generations." These costs of prevention are rarely accounted for in classroom calls for decisive action. Instead, children are exhorted to become politically involved.

For example, children were encouraged to write to President Bush to attend the United Nations Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, where global climate change was at the top of the agenda. The TBS "Save the Earth" series, which included an

episode of the popular cartoon "Captain Planet and the Planetasers" on the need to go to Rio, was in large part an effort to mobilize impressionable youth for this politically popular cause through the use of children's programming, "action packs," and educational materials.

10: The ozone layer is going, and so are we. The other global environmental threat that keeps children awake at night is the fear that human activity is destroying the ozone layer, exposing humans—and for that matter all types of flora and fauna—to hazardous levels of solar radiation. The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles tell chil-

dren, "The ozone layer protects us from the sun's deadly radiation...but the ozone layer is getting thinner each year." According to THIS PLANET IS MINE, "Ozone depletion will cause 'DNA damage and resultant genetic defect.' Moreover, Ultraviolet rays also contribute to the dramatic increase we have seen in skin cancers, eye cataracts...and impair the human immune system, reducing our ability to fight disease." In a recent debate on the Senate floor, Senator Albert Gore intoned, "We have to tell our children that they must redefine their relationship to the sky, and they must begin to think of the sky as a threatening part of their environment."