Environmental education for 'eco-smart' children

By Jonathan H. Adler

PART SIX

Children are rarely told that the ozone layer naturally thins and accretes every year in a seasonal cycle that is controlled by the sun. Manmade chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) are blamed for ozone depletion, while natural sources of ozone-depleting substances (for example, the oceans and volcanoes) are typically overlooked. Although chlorine molecules can contribute to ozone depletion, Linwood Callis of the National Aeronautics and Space Adminsitration's Atmospheric Sciences Division charges that "73 percent of the global (ozone) declines between 1979 and 1985 are due to natural effects related to solar variability." While such claims are not universally accepted in the scientific community, it is clear that children are only getting a small part of a very complex story-a story that hardly justifies fears of an impending apocalypse.

Contrary to what is being taught, the marginal ozone depletion that may be caused by CFCs would only result in marginal increases in UV-B radiation. For example, if 10 percent (a common estimate of the maximum potential ozone decline) of the ozone layer above Washington, D.C. disappeared tomorrow, radiation levels would only increase to approximately those typically found in Richmond, Virginia, almost 100 miles south. In fact, natural levels of UV-B rise rapidly as one approaches the equator or moves higher above sea level. Someone living in Denver receives significantly more UV-B exposure than a person in Minneapolis, but this is hardly cited as a reason not to move to the "mile-high city." It also must be noted that there is some inconclusive evidence that atmospheric ozone levels in the 1980s were higher than those in the 1950s.

The school materials also typically fail to explain the important human benefits that have resulted from the use of CFCs. For example, these chemicals have huelped save millions of lives through making available to the peoples of the world inexpensive refrigeration for food and medicine. As with many environmental crusades, the drive to eliminate CFCs, even if potentially justified, involves trade-offs that children shold be taught as well.

Toward a better shade of green

While environmentalism is likely of education in the years to come, this does not meant that America's children are to be condemned to curricula of half-truths and political advocacy. Instead, children can, and should be taught facts, not conjecture, and they should learn the whole story,. including how an environmental concern fits into the greater ecological and economic context. Rather than impressing upon children the need for polirtical advocacy, children should be encouraged to think of their own solutions after all the facts have been presented. If water use is an issue, a child should learn about the hydrological cycle; if the concern is solid waste, a child should learn where paper comes from and where it may eventually go. At that point it might be profitable for a schoolchild to hypothesize about how public or private action might address the concerns raised about a given issue. Children should not be told by their teachers that they should sign petitions, endorse political agendas, or write pleading letters to the president.

Children need to understand that modern activities do not cause only "negatives" and that all efforts to alleviate environmental impact are purely "positive." Children need to be taught that there are trade-offs implicit in every environmental issue. Recycling paper may reduce the logging of trees (although they are indeed a renewable resource), but it may increase the use of energy and water. Banning CFCs may thoretically affect the levels of stratospheric ozone, but it would restrict the availability of refrigeration needed to preserve food and medicine in the Third World.

Children also need to learn environmental issues in a balanced manner. If there is scientific uncertainly on the likelihood and probable impact of global climate change it is wholly inappropriate to scare children by telling them their parents are destroying the earth. Environemntal regualtions can often have significant impacts upon regional and national economies, yet wealtheir societies are not only healther, but also more likely to be concerned about the environment. This, too, should be an important consideration.

Environmental education can be a valuable addition to school curricula, but only if it is conducted in a careful, thoughtful, and non-ideological manner. After all, schools are for education, not political indoctrination. If educators approach environmental issues in such a balanced fashion, our children might not turn out politically correct, but at lest they will be much more "eco-smart."

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