

Environmental Education in Canada – Status, Prospects and Challenges

In 2017 the Canadian Network for Environmental Education and Communications (EECOM) will celebrate its 25th Anniversary. The annual conference, focused around the theme, *See Change--Tides of Environmental Learning* will be held in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, May 18-21. As part of the conference the planning committee felt that it might be interesting to invite a group of Canadian environmental educators who had extensive experience and long involvement in the field to express their views on five questions.



1. *How would you describe the current general status of environmental education in Canada?*
2. *EECOM describes the development of environmental literacy among Canadians as an important goal. In your opinion, how well is the concept of environmental literacy understood across a spectrum of environmental educators and communicators in Canada?*
3. *Since the formation of EECOM 25 years ago there have been profound developments in information and communications technologies and an explosion of new media and applications. In your view has the “revolution” in information and communications technologies been an asset to EE and communication or a distraction to attaining the goals described by EECOM.*
4. *What do you feel should be the priorities for an organization like EECOM in terms of accessing and addressing segments of the potential audience for EE in Canada?*
5. *In your view, how successful have environmental educators been in gaining a significant voice in program development and implementation in the K-12 and post-secondary education systems and also in communication initiatives from government agencies, non-profits, major media, and corporations.*

The questions made contact with some complex and evolving issues for environmental education. The responses from the participants in the process were thoughtful and at times provocative. What follows is a concise summary and synthesis of their responses to the five questions. Rather than discussing each question separately, this summary combines the major themes taken from the total set of responses to the questions. A more complete description of the participants responses to the individual questions is available and is recommended to those wishing greater detail and understanding of the responses to the five framing questions.

The Context of Environmental Education and Communications in Canada — Challenges and Opportunities

As a group the participants in the project described environmental education in Canada as being characterized by a wide range of activities and programs offered by individuals, schools, and a range of organizations both within and outside the formal education sector. Many EE initiatives are very strongly connected to local communities and contexts. Our respondents clearly acknowledged the great importance to environmental education of dedicated individuals who devote time, energy and personal resources to the development and maintenance to a variety of projects. Many have been active in EE for years. In some provinces the number of small, community based and local programs is large, sometimes numbering in excess of 100. These programs reach a wide range of audiences and participants including very young children and families, teens, pre and in-service teachers, employees in a variety of work settings, and elders. While many programs are focused on local community issues and needs, they also support general educational or recreational goals. The people who activate these projects represent a diversity of educational and experiential backgrounds and a range of ages, genders, and cultural backgrounds.

The number and variety of locally based EE projects and programs creates a need for better sharing and communication of ideas and resources and presents the EECOM network with an important opportunity to provide services and mentorship and to facilitate communication across various constituencies and locales. The respondents urged EECOM to continue to make enhanced communication and the promotion of collaborative efforts a key element of its organizational mission. It was also particularly recommended that EECOM strengthen the involvement of youth in its organizational structures and programming.

On the question of the extent to which environmental literacy could be seen as being understood and demonstrated by Canadians the idea of environmental literacy was seen as having value as a goal or general direction for EE activities and programs, but was also viewed as having value in shaping how individuals implement environmentally responsible and sustainable practices in their lives. A distinction was also made between eLiteracy as knowledge ABOUT the environment versus being demonstrated in commitments to action FOR the environment. In this regard the respondents expressed a desire for greater attention to be paid to developing EE programs that will involve high school students in field experiences and action projects.

On the other side of the reality that a great deal of EE activity across Canada is local, community-based and richly contextualized, is the apparent lack of appreciation of the significance of these activities by senior levels of government—provincial and federal. Our respondents made frequent note of the lack of coherent, strong and clear support for EE in policy or through programs of resources. It was recommended that EECOM should become more active in making senior governments more aware of the significant roles performed by the numerous small and diverse EE programs and should invite governments to offer various forms of practical and enabling support.

The respondents to the five framing questions were also asked to describe their views of the impacts on EE of the development and pervasive application of new digital media for information and communication. They took a fairly balanced view of the trends in digital media for communications, information and entertainment while noting that environmental educators should not ignore these developments or spend time and energy disparaging them. It was felt that the new digital media make accessible a great amount of information on many environmental topics and issues and can offer important educational experiences. Additionally it was noted that modern networking and multi-media communications tools offer powerful avenues for participation by individuals and groups who may have been marginalized or under-represented.

On the darker side of these trends some of our respondents questioned whether the new media could become a distraction from real world physical experiences or even be viewed and used as replacements for them. Further, it was felt that there is a great need to develop people's capacities for thinking critically about the quality of the information presented and arguments made for various positions. Some of the respondents asked whether the torrent of information and graphic images might even result in people becoming either extremely depressed with accompanying feelings of powerlessness or simply in "turning off".

Clearly, environmental educators will need to develop effective and intelligent strategies in order to take advantages of the powers and opportunities of the new media while helping users avoid their darker features. Here again, it was suggested that EECOM should consider how best to position itself as an organization in a multimedia digital environment. As one of the participants put it, environmental educators should not simply be consumers of the digital media but should work with students, teachers and others to develop new approaches and projects that are both responsible and educationally powerful.

In summary, the responses of the experienced environmental educators who participated in this project suggest that progress towards enhanced environmental education in Canada has occurred and continues to occur on a mixed front, very often at local levels, whether found in individual school or university programs (or even programs at particular faculties or departments) or in particular organizations, agencies, or corporations. EE was not seen generally as being given high-level recognition in the policies of governments. An important question for a national organization like EECOM concerns how to gain political clout and have a voice at the tables of policy makers. It was suggested that EECOM should become more proactive in seeking partnerships with a wider range of organizations, foundations, and individuals who could add power, enhance the EECOM profile, and attract greater financial resources.

However, respondents were also concerned that the idea of one single, best or standardized approach to EE should be avoided. It may be more helpful to take the view that the diversity of approaches to and venues for EE is similar to the diversity found in human culture and natural systems and that EE should be adaptive, localized, highly place-based and context situated. If that perspective is adopted then what role can an

organization such as EECOM play to support local action and diversity while also attracting greater support from senior governments. That question seems to hang before us. As one participant put it,

“A diversity of views isn’t necessarily a bad thing, but I would like to think that all EE practitioners believe in and promote a respect for our environment and its fragility. By and large, I believe that to be true.”

The following environmental educators have contributed their thoughts and perspectives to this project. Their contributions are greatly appreciated and are received with the hope that their comments and suggestions will act as stimulants to productive conversations and action proposals among the members of the environmental education community in Canada.

- Grant Gardner
- Sue Staniforth
- Kim Fulton
- Gareth Thompson
- Paul Hart
- Brian Herrin
- Bob Jickling
- Ann Jarnet
- Scott Slocombe
- Kerrie Mortin
- Rick Kool
- Chuck Hopkin

It was my pleasure to meet them again through their contributions to this paper.

~ Milton McClaren, May 12, 2017.