

THE ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION FORUM

Roland Goetz

The establishment, *modus operandi* and aims of the Environmental Communicators Forum in the greater Durban area is described.

In May 1984 the authors, following earlier initiatives, identified a need for environmental educators and organizations involved in environmental issues in the Greater Metropolitan area of Durban to co-operate on a fairly informal level by meeting to discuss environmental matters, to compare notes and to learn from each other as well as seeing what other places of environmental interest have to offer.

Contact was made with the Interpretation/Education members of various bodies. These included the following: Durban Natural History Museum, Centre for Rehabilitation of Wildlife, Keep Durban Beautiful Association, Fitzsimmons Snake Park, Durban Aquarium, Wildlife Society, Durban Parks, Recreation and Beaches Department (Natural Area), Edgewood Teacher's Training College, Springfield College, Bechet College, Natal Education Department (Environmental Section), Wild Adventure Expeditions, Natal Sharks Board, Kwa-Zulu Bureau for Natural Resources, Umgeni Bird Park, Killarney Crocodile Farm and the Natal Parks Board. Arising out of these productive contacts it was agreed that an organization should be formed that could enable the more effective communication of environmental issues, not forgetting the importance of different cultural values. This objective was to be achieved by people meeting to share skills and resources through an organization called *The Environmental Communicators Forum*.

A growing group meet on the first Thursday of each month at 14h30. The venue for the meeting is rotated to give each organization an opportunity to present their current projects. Most of the places represented cater for school groups, so after viewing the programmes offered, members can get together over a cup of tea and discuss the content and educational validity of the programme and alternative methods of education offered, such as videos, films, displays, pamphlets and 'hands on' experiences. The thorny question of worksheets often arises. Are they, for example, necessary? Should they be used before, after or during the environmental experience? There are many differing views, and indeed what works for one programme, may spell disaster to another.

Several of the institutions have film or video programmes that can be taken out to the schools, when the schools find it difficult to get the children in to visit. Members have contributed their ideas and experience to help improve format and content in audio-visual programmes.

No doubt it came as a surprise to some to learn from Isolde Mellet of CROW (Centre for Rehabilitation of Wildlife), that many of the very small children visiting her model farm at CROW have never seen a real cow or sheep before. At the other end of the education spectrum it is a matter of some concern to members that while primary schools are frequent visitors to most of the places represented, high schools are seldom seen except at Beachwood Mangroves. Much discussion has taken place as to how programmes can be more adapted to the high school pupil, and how more syllabus orientated information can be disseminated.

Methodology and psychology are two facets of education which, through lack of knowledge, are often neglected. Mari Jessiman of Keep Durban Beautiful has visited similar establishments overseas and an in-

teresting meeting was held at Keep Durban Beautiful headquarters, when she explained the psychology used to try to persuade people to care for their environment. Rob O'Donoghue, of Natal Parks Board, has made a study of the methodology of environmental education and is very generous with both his time and his material. His input to the forum is of great value.

Teachers and environmentalists too often believe that it is necessary to travel many kilometres out of town to be able to reach a 'natural' area. Geoff Nichols of Durban Parks Department has shown that his department provide several 'natural' areas within the Durban boundary and has compiled very informative booklets for self-guided nature trails, with pictures of the trees, plants and birds that can be seen in those areas. The forum spent a useful morning at the timber 'viewing platform' in Burman Bush, where many suggestions were made for the presentation of information through displays, maps and models.

Through the medium of the forum not only is the conservation community informed, in depth, about what organizations are doing, but the exchanges provide an opportunity for expert input by other members. In this way everyone has benefitted. Every quarter a relevant theme is identified and an expert in that field invited to speak. Teacher training colleges have also been invited to participate and through this student teachers have been exposed to the educational potential of each organization. A convenor is elected on a six-monthly basis thus giving everyone an opportunity to be involved in co-ordination of the group. Administration is kept to a minimum. The programme is set out in advance and each host body provides resource literature on their project. A record of the meeting is thus indirectly kept. The organization is kept informal, but it is also well structured and this is borne out by the fact that the Environmental Communication Forum is still functioning in a positive way, contributing to the exchange of information and ideas in the field of environmental education.

While various bodies hold symposia at different venues around the country, often interested people only hear about the event after it has taken place. Because forum members constitute a body from many varied disciplines and interests, they get to hear about such symposia through the other members. For example, science, geography and environmental symposia have been attended by members, with subsequent feedback to the group.

Education must be dynamic to be worthwhile and stimulating, and to be dynamic demands interaction with other educationists and with those being educated. This the forum provides. It is no use offering a facility if those to whom it is offered are unaware of its existence, or of its value. This the forum seeks to redress. All people learn from others, whether from their mistakes or from their successes.

Would it not be a good idea to see a similar forum started at each of the main centres in Southern Africa? For any further information concerning Environmental Communication Forum contact Roland Goetz or any of the organizations mentioned.

* See address on p. 1 - Ed.