

15 YEARS ON AND TIME FOR A REFLECTIVE PAUSE?

EEASA turned 15 years old in 1997 - not an unimportant event in the life of a voluntary association. Its activities have exceeded many of the dreams of its founders and it has much to be proud of. Nevertheless, with growing environmental education linkages between the countries of sub-saharan Africa, a major new educational dispensation in the offing in South Africa, and the hope of many for an African renaissance, this is perhaps an opportune moment to pause and reflect both on the achievements of the Association and some of the considerations it might take into account for the future.

EEASA was founded in April 1982 at southern Africa's first international conference on environmental education, held at Treverton College in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands. It was founded in a spirit of idealism and a belief that, despite many signs to the contrary in the early eighties, environmental education as an idea, a concept and a process was inextricably bound up with democratic processes and participatory decision-making on all matters environmental. There was also a strong belief that international boundaries were relatively irrelevant when environmental concerns were being addressed. The first EEASA 'teacher education workshop' held at Umgeni Valley in September 1982, and attended by about 15 individuals, was to grow into an annual workshop and ultimately the annual EEASA conference and workshop as we now know it, with hundreds attending. It has been held all over South Africa, in Swaziland and in Namibia and in 1998 is to be held in Botswana. Perhaps by the time of EEASA's 21st birthday it will have been held in every country of southern Africa. Remember Martin Luther King's "I dreamed a dream ..."?

Founded in a commitment to non-discrimination, the Association can take pride that even in the darkest years of apartheid it was a non-exclusive body. It never kept race-based records, but my overwhelming impression, and those of others who have been associated with EEASA for a long time, is that it has always been representative of the population of South and southern Africa. Concomitantly, just as it was viewed with some suspicion by the previous South African regime, so EEASA has had enormous credibility with the forces of change in South Africa - as far back as 1986!

EEASA has also contributed very effectively and meaningfully to change and transformation in South Africa, where it has been most active. A good example is its involvement with the Environmental Education Policy Initiative and later the Environmental Education Curriculum Initiative with which hopefully most members will be familiar. It has attracted the talents of people of outstanding abilities who have served the needs of environmental education selflessly and with dedication and it has provided countless opportunities for the personal growth and development of individuals and groups within environmental education. Perhaps its most lasting legacy will be the many thousands of people it has brought together to share ideas, experiences and differences and the robust networks it has helped to develop and extend throughout the subcontinent. These in turn are increasingly linked to the international environmental education community.

The *South African Journal of Environmental Education* started in 1984 (and running to issue 17 this year!) and the *Environmental Education Bulletin* started in 1989, have in many respects not only been the flagships of the Association, but the glue which has held its membership together. Most importantly, they have provided a voice and an outlet for those who would, for many reasons, not otherwise have shared their views, insights and wisdom in writing. This has been irrespective of any political, ideological or other 'correctnesses' in fashion at the time; a tradition which is a priceless treasure, to be guarded with all our skill and courage.

Also printed on the inside cover of most of the *Journals* and *Bulletins* are the founding aims of the organisation which have remained unchanged, and argued by many to be as relevant now as when they were formulated. Is it not time they were revisited? Even if a process of review concludes with an affirmation of these aims, would the exercise in itself not have been a valuable one, particularly given the potential to involve the full membership of EEASA in the endeavour? Perhaps one of the questions which might be asked is how well EEASA lives up to its aims and carries them out in practice - a kind of ethical audit.

A few other questions might further fuel the debate. Do we, for example, need to be extra vigilant of a

dogmatic righteousness about certain theoretical perspectives? Do we genuinely welcome alternative viewpoints, often expressed in more simple language, sometimes a little confused and not necessarily 'academically' thought through, but nevertheless valid concerns? Concomitantly, is the complex language, technical terminology, theoretical abstraction and plain jargon which all too frequently rears its head at environmental education conferences and *indabas* an empowering or a disempowering and marginalising force within EEASA? Is it time to debate this?

These questions have been raised for a number of years and will not easily go away. Nor will they be easily resolved as there are inevitable and justifiably competing interests, but some solution and compromise needs to be found if individuals and groups are not to be frustrated in their desire to contribute to debate and development. What we do not want to 'go away' are some of our valued membership, most particularly field-, community- or conservation - workers in environmental education. Is it justifiable that anyone should leave an EEASA conference feeling mystified or, worse still, alienated from the processes and dynamics of environmental education? Is it happening? Should we within the Association consciously concern ourselves more with avoiding the mystification of ideas, abstractions and theoretical positions which are, nevertheless, in themselves, the essence of our growth and intrinsic to our continued development? Put bluntly, to what extent are ideas shared in an accessible way within EEASA? Should this be a role, function or aim of EEASA and, if so, can the organisation still remain at the academic and intellectual leading edge?

A related dimension which might be considered is whether EEASA can be both a forum for the exchange of ideas and a pressure group with particular agendas. Possibly it can, but have we thought it through? At least a few good environmental education practitioners have withdrawn from involvement with EEASA and even environmental education as they have perceived it to be taken over by 'politicos' with agendas which sometimes seem remote from environmental concerns. While the overwhelming majority of environmental educators in southern Africa would argue that 'the environment' itself and environmental education are dynamic concepts, should we nonetheless pause to reflect on the praxis of this belief?

Perhaps a 'problem' in EEASA is that it has always tried to incorporate everyone with an interest in environmental education and this has for many members been its greatest strength. We should ask ourselves however, how genuinely inclusive EEASA is at present and how inclusive we want it to be. It is possibly also time to reassess the dynamics and operational realities of a wide and diverse inclusiveness.

In conclusion, while it would, I hope, be widely agreed that EEASA has overwhelmingly fulfilled its aims, we should be neither complacent about where we are nor make unwise assumptions about where we are going and who is to be part of that future.

Pat Irwin (co-editor)

A CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Many of the issues raised above have been troubling circles of EEASA members for years, as reflected in the minutes of many an annual general meeting. To take the debate further in a meaningful way we need to use the various forums at our disposal more productively. The annual conference is one such forum, and perhaps the issues around the value of the conference-and-workshops to a wide range of members, and the inclusiveness of the association, can be most fruitfully addressed at the 1998 conference itself. Members interested in contributing to such a session, in whatever capacity, are encouraged to contact the editors.

The *Southern African Journal of Environmental Education* has been and still is the only regular forum where those academically engaged in environmental education can publish research and share insights and questions with colleagues who are similarly occupied. It is a great pity that the South African National Department of Education has once again decided, in 1996, that the publication will not receive SAPSE accreditation. (SAPSE is the Standards Authority on Post-School Education and its approval allows local academics to receive recognition in their institutions for published works, manifesting in turn as subsidy points for the institution.) The department's reason-

ing is that the *SAJEE* is not entirely a research journal.

While this decision raises the question as to whether the national education body fails to recognise conceptual or praxiological enquiry as *bona fide* research, it should serve to encourage EEASA members to publish their research even more vigorously in the Journal. There are other reasons for doing so. We are increasingly receiving excellent contributions from international authors. While these enrich our local forum enormously, and allow members without access to libraries exposure to international thinking, we need to retain a strong southern African orientation to the *SAJEE*. For this reason it is encouraging to find several new local researchers submitting papers to the *Journal*, and to be able to share some of their work in this edition. A further reason for southern Africans to write about our research is that without recourse to sound empirical work the discussions around contentious issues called for above may remain at the level of rhetorical opinion. Without clarification and grounding in praxis such discussion may then simply detract from and not enhance our work.

A third forum for sharing our work and ideas is in the form of monographs. An EEASA monograph on indigenous knowledge and environmental education will be compiled in the first half of 1998. This is finally therefore also an invitation for contributions on this very current topic, to be compiled by myself and Rob O'Donoghue. A range of formats would be appropriate, from research papers, comments, critiques, conceptual analyses, historical and literature reviews to stories, case studies and reports of experiences in the field. All suitable contributions will be framed in a coherent collection for sharing at the next EEASA conference. Do not delay! Write and contribute your voice to the rich conversation for sustainability.

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