

The Greening of the Classroom

Kids are learning junk environmentalism in school.

By Michael Chapman

Johnny can't read, write or do math. But he knows about global warming, acid rain, nuclear power, deforestation, big oil and capitalism.

Johnny knows all this because his teachers have told him so. And they got help from interest groups, the Environmental Protection Agency and green textbooks that purport to explain these Earth-in-the-balance issues.

Problem is, most of the texts are one-sided, say critics. They also fail to explain basic economics, such as prices, which affect demand for and supply of natural resources and energy.

Many texts have the look of advocacy tomes, often ignoring sound science in favour of junk science, the critics say. Socialist solutions to problems are favoured over capitalist ones, and new age spirituality is emphasized.

"With few exceptions, textbook treatment of environmental issues is influenced by an ideological view that presents human beings as evil and blames the United States in particular and Western industrial societies in general for every environmental ill," said Michael Sanera, head of the Center for Environmental Education Research.

Sanera and Jane Shaw wrote *Facts, Not Fear: A Parent's Guide to Teaching Children About the Environment*, based on their review of more than 130 texts and 170 environmental books for kids in grades K-12. Views similar to theirs were expressed by the green magazines *Garbage* and *Audubon*, the magazine of the National Audubon Society.

Of course, advocates say the environment is too important to be ignored. And they say traditional approaches — a reliance on markets, a focus on the individual — haven't worked. Getting schoolkids to change their way of thinking is the only way to save the planet from the wasteful habits of their parents, according to those who push the green agenda in schools.

IGNORED FACTS

- The world's population growth has dropped since the '60s. Life expectancy has risen from 47 to 75 years since 1900.
- Many resources and energy prices have plunged in recent years, showing abundance, not scarcity.
- Global warming is a theory. In fact, most of the temperature rise in the last 100 years happened before 1938.
- The largest study on acid rain, a 10-year, \$500 million government-funded project, found no convincing evidence that acid rain kills forests.
- The U.S. is not running out of landfill space. All the garbage Americans will produce for the next 1,000 years would fill a space 44 miles square and 120 feet deep.
- Food packaging reduces waste. For every 1% increase in packaging, there is a 1.6% decrease in food waste.

Many analysts agree that public schools in general fail to teach kids what they need to know to be educated. Learning about the environment probably is helpful.

But critics say mastering the basics first is most important for kids. And learning about the environment shouldn't include a radical green agenda, bereft of balance and sound scientific rules.

The question is: How do you best teach kids about the planet?

In 1972, a group of global leaders called the Club of Rome published *The Limits to Growth*. They warned that the world would run out of gold in 1981, mercury in 1985, tin by 1987, zinc by 1990, oil by 1992, and copper, lead and natural gas by 1993.

They were wrong, of course. But they helped to set the tone for environmental education for two decades.

Besides their apocalyptic views, the standard textbooks place little emphasis on basic economics — prices, scarcity, supply and demand — and how these factors affect the use of resources and the environment.

If gasoline prices rise, people drive less. They use substitutes, such as a bicycle, bus or subway. Rising demand and higher prices will generate greater supplies.

For instance, between 1950 and 1990, oil and natural gas reserves rose 733%, according to Stephen Moore of the Cato Institute. Furthermore, the real average price of natural resources has decreased. It's now about one-eighth of what it was in 1900, said Moore.

Also, no one knows how much oil is in the earth. Government officials and private analysts have predicted at various times that oil would be depleted in 1914, 1919, 1926, 1939, 1949, and 1980. President Carter falsely predicted in 1977 that "we could use up all proven reserves of oil in the entire world by the end of the next decade."

But this is rarely found in green texts. "In essence, the environmental educational campaign is aimed at turning our nation's schoolchildren into environmentalists," said Jo Kwong, a researcher at the Atlas Economic Research Foundation.

"We are producing a nation of 'doomsday kids' or 'eco-kids — children who can tell you what is right and wrong but are woefully ignorant of the reasons why. Environmental education preaches socially or politically correct lessons. It is unabashedly devoted to activism and politics, rather than knowledge and understanding."

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