

A Personal Letter from the Founder: Why *Earth* Education?

Dear Friend of Planet Earth,

We thought we should explain our name. The Institute for Earth Education was founded in 1974 to offer a different educational response to our environmental problems than the one adopted by the educational establishment. Today, we have educators involved with us around the world, and formal branches underway in a number of countries.

Essentially, we are the world's alternative to the pervasive agency- and industry-sponsored supplemental environmental education. We maintain that instructional programs aimed at helping people live more lightly on the planet are just as important as programs in math and science, or history and language. As we like to put it, we represent the fourth 'R' – Readin', Ritin', 'Rithmetic, and Relationship – for it is our relationship with the planet and its natural systems and communities that must change if we are to enjoy a biotically rich and healthy planet in the future.

Of course, we hope people won't take our criticism of the field personally; there are a lot of good people out there doing good things for the planet, things they call environmental education. But in general, we feel the original mission of environmental education went astray. It was trivialized by mainstream education, diluted by those with other agendas, and co-opted by the very agencies and industries that have contributed so much to our environmental problems. Many well-meaning teachers and leaders don't know the real origins of the material they have been given, or understand how insidious those materials are in conveying a consumer-oriented, exploitive world view (often in what they leave out of their explanations and examples). Nor does the public realize that the world's formal educational response to our environmental problems has been merely to encourage teachers to infuse environmental messages and perspectives into all of their subjects.

In reality, those teachers receive little or no training for how to do this, nor any time in which to carry it out, but that's the educational strategy being pursued. Why? Because it's easy. Most coordinators and professors don't have to do the job themselves; they just tell the teachers to do it, and give them a collection of industry- and agency-sponsored supplemental activities to sprinkle over their subjects. We were convinced this approach would not get the educational job done that was, and is, so desperately needed. Poke your head into the cockpit the next time you fly somewhere and ask the pilot where he learned how to fly. If he replies that he had a little piece of his instruction in math class, another in history, and yet a third in language arts, will you stay on board? Well, that's what the theory of environmental education asked us to do. Learning to live more lightly on the planet was the most important educational mission of our times. Bar none. Yet we went about it in this supplemental, piecemeal, disconnected fashion called the infusion model.

In fact, the vast majority of educators still appear to think environmental education is about having students pick up litter and recycle their soda cans, then sit around the classroom discussing rainforest destruction as an environmental issue. They don't



education



contemplation



interpretation



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suggest that we stop eating convenience food (the source of much school grounds litter), or avoid soda pop, and thus they end up externalizing the issues instead of internalizing them.

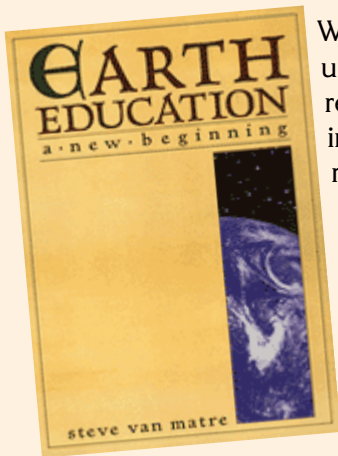


Frankly, once you have taken the issues approach, regardless of any attempt to internalize the issue at hand, you will open up the door as well for every reactionary in the land. And the “cornucopians” will insist on a “balanced” presentation which often ends up with no “action” at all. That’s a major advantage of our lifestyle approach instead. You won’t get sucked into talking an issue to death. It is difficult to campaign for a “balanced” approach when all you are initially asking people to figure out are ways to use less energy and consume less material in their own lives. Make no mistake: earth education is about change; environmental education is now about balance.

And by jumping into the issues before your students understand the ecological processes and their personal role in them, many of those students will end up knowing a lot about the rainforest, for example, and nothing about their forest, nor how their own lifestyle impacts upon both. People who jump to the issues often jump over the connections.

Please don’t misunderstand: we think the issues are important too, but they need to be grounded in how this planet functions ecologically and examined in the context of one’s own life. Once you begin making changes in your personal habits you will begin looking around for like-minded people and alternative systems to support your efforts. That’s earth education. It’s about relationships.

Earth education is programmatic and integral, not random and supplemental. It is natural-world based, not classroom-based. It is lifestyle-oriented, instead of issues-oriented. And it is infused with the messages of deep ecology as opposed to the subtle management messages that pervade much of the material available in environmental education.



Why was our criticism necessary, especially when the field of environmental education was under increasing attacks from various exploitive groups in the political spectrum? If you really accept that the planet is in serious ecological trouble, and if you really believe the infusion model of environmental education does not represent a serious educational response to that trouble, then don’t you have an obligation to take a stand and speak out?

However, even though we have produced several of our own model programs as an alternative to the infusion model, we are not just pushing our own materials. Earth education can be done anytime, anywhere, with or without us. We spent 10 years writing *Earth Education... A New Beginning*, which presents the template and tools that anyone can use in developing a carefully-crafted alternative to the infusion approach. Please take a look at that overview.

The Institute for Earth Education represents the largest international group of educators in the environmental movement. It is an independent, member-supported voice with no government, foundation, or corporate sponsorship. We hope you will take our points to heart and examine more closely the cornucopian materials and supplemental methods that are widely distributed in this field. Who paid for them? Who influenced them? And how are they actually used? These are crucial questions for the future biotic health and richness of our home in space. We have been pursuing our mission to educate the educators about this concern for half a century now, and we would welcome your support.

For the planet,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Steve Van Matre'. The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Steve Van Matre
international chair
The Institute for Earth Education