

On the cusp of change: How ecological literacy is helping us shift to a more sustainable world

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1. INTRODUCTION

During the past 250 years, human beings have altered the planet more rapidly than any other period in history. We have consumed resources faster than they can regenerate. We have strained fisheries to the point of collapse. We have driven thousands of plants and animals to extinction. We have pumped so much carbon dioxide into the atmosphere that the climate is changing.

A major shift in our consumption and production patterns is needed in order to live within the constraints of the natural systems that support us. We need a way of thinking that reflects the scientific *reality* of the world we live in. We need to become ecologically literate. Becoming ecologically literate means knowing the story about who we are and where we come from. It's about understanding that we are a part of – not apart from – the natural world. The term “ecoliteracy” was coined by David Orr and Fritjof Capra in the 1990s. According to Orr and Capra, ecological literacy is much more than just the passive acquisition of knowledge; it is the ability to understand the natural systems that make life on earth possible and to live accordingly.

2. METHODOLOGY

This thesis shows why ecological literacy is needed, how it works, and how it can help. It uses Schumacher College's six-month ecoliteracy course as a case study of what educational institutions can do to teach ecological literacy. Located on a rural estate in southwest England, Schumacher College has become an internationally renowned institution on the leading edge of environmental education. Schumacher promotes a holistic approach to learning, research and science. It focuses on how economic, environmental, cultural and political systems are related. Issues are neither seen nor tackled in isolation. The college teaches ecoliteracy from a theoretical point of view but it also looks at how to put ecoliteracy into practice – from community initiatives to sustainable farming to ecological design. I spent two weeks at Schumacher College in October 2011. The purpose of my trip was twofold: 1) to participate in the six-month pilot course on ecoliteracy; and 2) to use Schumacher College as a case study of how to put ecoliteracy in action.

3. CONCLUSION

How do we move from teaching the facts of ecology to creating personal understanding to igniting the passion for change? This is a difficult challenge, one that tends to raise more questions than answers. This thesis contends that ecological literacy can help put us on a more sustainable path, one in line with the reality of the relationships of living things. But ecoliteracy is a complex and evolving concept. Because it is difficult to design and implement, it is also difficult to teach, especially in a traditional school setting where studies are divided into different disciplines. The importance of ecoliteracy has only recently been recognized, and it is a field that is still maturing and developing. But, ultimately, it is the foundation for a new kind of education that is urgently needed.

Schumacher's ecoliteracy course could serve as a blueprint for a deeper kind of education that can help us create a more sustainable world.