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Environmental education as a key factor of environmental consciousness

Introduction

Nowadays human civilization has reached such extreme limits in their attitude towards nature that the mere possibility of its sustainable development is under threat. It has been generally recognized that the major cause of the ecological crisis of the modern society is the ignorance or disregard for the laws of nature, thoughtless, exploitative attitude towards the environment and its resources.

At the present stage of social development, human activity does not only cause environmental threats but, as a German scientist K.M. Meyer-Abich states, is becoming universal, threatening the integrity of nature as a whole, co-existence of nature and man [Meyer-Abich 2004: 57]. This situation calls for a necessity to change the current way of life, to harmonize the relationship between man and nature. The main significance of the present research is, primarily, to understand the impossibility to solve environmental problems by technical means only. Philosophical changes are vitally important in this regard, too. Hence, the importance of environmental education, as a prerequisite for the development of environmental safety; it should become an obligatory basis for solving urgent environmental and social issues of our time.

The problem of environmental education is examined in modern researches of theoretical and applied character. The practical importance of environmental education is analyzed in the works of Ye. Hirusova, V. Krysachenko, O. Saltovskiy, M. Khyly'ko, L. Yurchenko. Certain theoretical aspects of the environmental education are highlighted by V. Derkach, A. Yermolenko, T.S. Ninova, Skrebets, A.Tolstoukhov et al. Besides, the issues regarding the content, objectives, forms and methods of environmental education were dwelt upon in many PhD theses (A. Vargo, N. Yefimenko, T. Kuchay, L. Markovych, Yu. Saunova, S. Soboleva, L. Titarenko, D. Toporovsky, R. Kharytonov, O. Chernikov et al.). However, it should be noted that the social aspects of environmental education are still not scrutinized thoroughly. Thus, the purpose of the present paper is to give theoretical justification of the essence of environmental education as a major factor in developing environmental consciousness and to characterize its components.

1. Subject matter

The environmental problems which steadily affect all the spheres of human life have caused the necessity to raise the necessity of environmental education of the population. But, in order to resolve such problems, it is crucial to acquire skilled professionals. Training of environmental experts in different fields of study (engineers- ecologists, geoecologists, agroecologists, specialists in environmental law, management and audit, etc.) can solve certain economic issues of environmental character. However, it is disputable whether it can substantially contribute to solving global environmental problems, because it is the task of all nations to overcome the global environmental crisis, since it is directly dependent on the level of environmental consciousness of society. General environmental education at all levels should contribute to ecological awareness of people and it cannot not be a burden of useless knowledge. One of the reasons that lead to deepening of ecological crisis, as G.O. Biliavskiy states, is the low level of environmental education of the majority of executives and government officials in all countries, and Ukraine is not an exception [Biliavskiy 1993: 87].

Environmental education – is a continuous process of adopting the values and concepts that aim to develop the skills and attitudes which are necessary to understand and evaluate the relationships among people, their culture and the environment, as well as to develop skills in order to make environmentally appropriate decisions and assimilate the rules of behavior in the ecological environment [*Conception...* 1995: 4]. But conscious attitude towards nature is only possible when every person has acquired ecological culture and broad environmental knowledge about the laws of nature. The goal of environmental education is to develop scientific knowledge, outlook and confidence that lay the foundations of a responsible attitude towards the ecological environment.

One of the key documents that determine the content, objectives, and structure of the environmental education is the Conception of the environmental education in Ukraine. According to this document, environmental education shall involve all ages, professional and social groups, and it shall pursue the following principles: consistency and continuity; providing conditions for the formation of ecological culture on different levels of education; focus on the idea of the integrity of nature; interdisciplinary approach to the formation of ecological thinking; interaction of local history, national and global thinking that promote deep understanding of environmental issues at different levels; specificity and objectivity of knowledge and skills; interrelationship of profound environmental knowledge and lofty human values. Accordingly, environmental education does not boil down to the study of environmentally oriented disciplines. Environmental education is a combination of the following components: environmental knowledge – ecological thinking – environmental outlook – environmental ethics – environmental culture [*Conception of the ecological...* 2002: 5].

The first level of environmental education involves not only acquiring knowledge, but also creates preconditions of internal culture of a person, develops readiness to conscious activities concerning harmonization of the relationship between man and society. What is vital today, as V. Krysachenko and M. Khil'ko „note, is not just to accumulate environmental knowledge, but to develop cognitive skills, ability to acquire new knowledge so that to form the basis for a new outlook and, hence, to address any political, social and economic issues primarily from the perspective of nature safeguarding” [Krysachenko 2002: 468–469].

Having analyzed the scientific literature the authors have come to conclusion that the overall objective of environmental education and upbringing is the environmental awareness of a personality. It is specified by three main tasks which are to be developed: adequate ecological concepts; subjective attitude towards nature; and a system of skills and competences (techniques) to interact with nature.

Environmental consciousness can be defined as organic combination of environmental knowledge, thoughts, ideas, confidence, feelings, aspirations, conception of interrelationship of society and nature, our common future and determination of our place in the ecosystem [Varho 2007: 6]. Thus, environmental consciousness is realized in purposeful meaningful environmental activities of people, in safeguarding moral values and environmental principles. Due to the fact that the environmental crisis – is largely viewed as an ideological and philosophical crisis, which affects human consciousness, it is necessary to change the current dominant consciousness in order to prevent environmental disasters. This stipulates, first of all, a system of ecological education of the younger generation at all levels of development since their early age.

The knowledge that the young people gain in the process of environmental education contribute to their understanding of the importance of environmental issues and rational use of natural resources, thereby they adopt one of the key components of environmental outlook – environmental consciousness which originates from logical rethinking of knowledge, transforming them into beliefs. This confidence in the need to protect and improve the environment, and to save resources will determine the values and awareness of people, their conscious attitude towards nature.

The main task of environmental awareness is the development of human creative thinking principles that would allow herself to set goals that reflect the real relationship between man and nature in the dynamics of their development, and to realize these goals, using the whole volume of human knowledge. Ye.V. Hirusov states, that environmental consciousness is a set of views, theories and emotions that reflect the relationship between society and nature in terms of their solutions according to specific social and natural possibilities. The author argues that these are the theoretical and emotional prerequisites for solving environmental problems [Hirusov 1976: 115].

Environmental consciousness is based on ideological and moral values, but it envisages their individual awareness. It is developed from the knowledge and beliefs in the relationships of society and nature, based on environmentally reasonable attitude towards natural resources, and the abilities to apply scientifically grounded decisions in relation towards nature, reflects an individual's contact with natural ecosystems.

In order to reveal the structure of ecological consciousness of our contemporary, the scholars have identified the key components that reflect his social nature and regulatory functions. In this regard, environmental consciousness involves: conscious acquisition of the norms of scientifically grounded, environmentally appropriate use of nature by man, and developing the system of environmental beliefs, knowledge and skills on this basis, which will ensure optimal ecological practical training; learning the rules of using engineering, up-to-date technologies and organization of human activities from the standpoint of responsible attitude towards environmental issues and application of environmental legislation, ecological situation that has emerged in industry in the region and in the state, as well as on a global scale; understanding oneself as part of nature, which is the source of human health, humanity, patriotic, moral, aesthetic, and other features, perception of nature as social value [Ninova 1998: 158].

A high level of environmental awareness promotes conscious deepening of ecological knowledge and using them to wisely co-exist with ecological environment, rationalization of nature use. The level of environmental awareness of young people depends on the level of development of such features as: environmental concern, a sense of responsibility for nature preservation, love of nature. Of great importance in this respect are direct contacts with nature, which make it possible not only to realize the environmental problems facing the society in their general form, but even to formulate these problems in some cases.

Environmental knowledge is a prerequisite for the development of environmental consciousness, and the environmental outlook is the result of their successful mastering.

N.V. Lysenko emphasizes that environmental education deals not only with environmental protection, but it is an important component in the formation of human basic vision, comprehensive development of their spiritual qualities [Lysenko 2003: 53]. The key to development of ecological culture of every individual and the society as a whole is well-organized system of environmental education. Environmental education should result in a harmonious combination of a sense of duty and responsibility with a sense of admiration by the grandeur and beauty of the real world. Only such unity will motivate students to engage in environmental activities. Therefore, modern education should be environmentally oriented, notably, based on the latest achievement of environmental research, considering its key trends [Lysenko 2003: 63–64].

Conclusion

Thus, modern environmental education in its theoretical part should be extended to the scientific understanding of the world harmony – nature, man and the principles of their optimal interaction. The objectives of environmental education should be: learning – acquiring environmental knowledge and practical experience in solving problems in this field; education – formation of coherent environmental attitudes; intellectual development – ability to analyze cause-and-effect relations of situations and to choose solutions to environmental problems. Today, the main objectives are to develop environmental culture of our nation and raise their environmental consciousness. Environmental awareness and behavior of students should be based on an interdisciplinary approach, when the relevant information is included in the content of various disciplines, primarily of natural cycle. In the academic training process it is very important to use such forms and methods of work which will ensure the profound formation of students' environmental consciousness, in spite of the shortcomings in the educational programs. Further research on this topic will cover the role of knowledge and the capacity of academic disciplines in developing ecological consciousness, studying the mechanism of the emergence of environmental values, reasoning of environmental ethics, working out recommendations concerning the context and procedure of raising the level of environmental culture.

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Abstract

Understanding the phenomenon of environmental education and implementation of its principles in the cultural life of our contemporary is an urgent problem of today. The integrity of the natural environment for human existence, and the acquisition of skills necessary for an individual in the contemporary society depend on the level of environmental upbringing and environmental education of people, and the younger generation, in particular. Environmental education aims to help people understand the causes of environmental changes and to propose the ways to prevent them.

The article highlights the aims, subject matter & peculiarities of environmental education, its influence on the formation of environmental consciousness of the younger generation in Ukraine. Environmental knowledge is regarded as a prerequisite for the development of environmental consciousness, and their successful acquisition forms environmental outlook.

Keywords: environmental education, environmental knowledge, ecological thinking, environmental outlook, environmental consciousness, environmental ethics, environmental culture, ecological environment.