

HISTORY AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

A REVIEW OF AGAR'S THESIS WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO SOUTHERN AFRICA

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History has a major contribution to make to the understanding of the present day environment, and consequently a significant role to play in environmental education. Agar's (1973) arguments for this are reviewed in the context of contemporary Southern Africa.

Geography and biology have tended to become synonymous with the concept of environmental education. History, on the other hand, does not yet enjoy this happy state of affairs.

It is always difficult to justify the inclusion of one's favourite subject in anything, be it a school curriculum or a course of study. Most of us merely assume that our subject has a *de facto* right to inclusion. Seldom are we called upon to account for our claims to this assumed right. Many historians furthermore fail to see why any form of justification is necessary.

Reality is that at the best of times the status of history, even as a school subject, is under attack. This may partly be as a result of the way it is taught, but more often it arises from a misconception of the true nature of history and the role which it can and should be playing in the education of mankind. The time has come when history must account for its presence and rightful role within the broadly accepted framework of environmental education.

This challenge was first taken up ten years ago by Nigel Agar in an article which appeared in *Teaching History*, the journal of the Historical Association. Entitled simply 'The Place of History in Environmental Education' the article set out to define what contribution history could make to the development of awareness and responsibility towards the human environment. Agar (1973) pinpointed four areas as the basis of his argument. It is worth considering each of them within the context of Southern African examples.

In his first point Agar expresses strong doubt as to whether any real understanding of an environment can be achieved without reference to the activities of man in a historical context. This argument may be illustrated by reference to the demographic patterns found in present-day Southern Africa. To assume (and ridiculous as it may seem, there are people who do) that urban communities have always existed where they do today is to ignore the past entirely. One has to take account of human migrations, starting with colonisation and ranging through the *mfecane*, the Great Trek, the development of the mining and subsequent industries and the current causes of migratory labour. The influence of disease, famine, drought and dispossession of land cannot be neglected. Without an understanding of these factors and their interrelationships the study of urban environments in Southern Africa would be subject to shallow and superficial interpretation.

The work of many contemporary environmentally orientated organisations is directed to the development of appropriate attitudes to the environment. It is accepted by most of those involved that this task is often a difficult and slow process. Agar highlights this in maintaining, as his second point, that the attitude of man towards his environment is conditioned

by historical experience. Take as examples the general attitudes of the people of our subcontinent towards two renewable resources – wood as a source of fuel and grass for grazing. These are fundamentally attitudes of exploitation.

Though such attitudes may be condemned by those who consider themselves environmentally conscious, cognisance must be taken of the attitude of past generations to these questions. Previously there was an abundance of firewood which served as fuel for cooking and heating. There was no need to consider reforestation or alternative sources for the provision of these amenities – trees just grew. Consequently today we find ourselves at a crisis point as far as indigenous forests are concerned.

It has been widely reported in the press in recent months for example, that each person in the KwaZulu region uses approximately one ton of firewood per year. It is significant that the attitude to firewood has altered very little over the past 100 years. Now, with increasing population pressure, there is still no evidence that the inhabitants of the region are seeking alternative sources of heating. Nor are they clamouring for reforestation. Similarly attitudes towards the utilisation of grazing for livestock have not undergone much change since the arrival of the first nomadic pastoralists. Attitudes towards both these resources have been developed over long periods of time. To change them will require a thorough understanding of their origin and development.

Agar's third point is closely linked to his first. He holds that as the urban environment is by its very nature the creation of man, a very full understanding of the past evolution of society is essential to explain the nature and growth of cities. A city like Soweto serves as a good illustration. Here a million or so people of different ethnic origins are congregated together. They use the same facilities such as trains and buses; their children go to school together. Their very existence in such a society would have been anathema to their forefathers – and yet today this phenomena exists. Associated environmental problems can only be understood in the light of the evolution of such societies.

This brings us to Agar's final point – one worth pondering over. Historians have always maintained that a study of history encourages a sense of proportion in all things. If history can do nothing else in the field of environmental education the encouragement of this attribute will still be one of the finest contributions any subject can make. Agar explains it thus:

"Without taking proper account of historical factors the student of the environment confines his attention exclusively to the physical aspects of the problem and can very easily become overimpressed with the power of technology and the inevitability of progress or of doom. It is a fallacy to hold that just because a thing is possible it will therefore happen." (Agar, 1973, p. 129).

He goes on to make the point that although it is commonly accepted that man possesses a greater capability to carry out vast changes to his environment than hitherto, the historical context can still not be ignored. He stresses that it is essential to take the human element into account even when discussing the purely physical environment. In this respect the store that is placed upon technology today may be questionable. Consider the following examples. The forests of North

America were cleared by the axe; the forests of South America have not yet succumbed to the bulldozer. During the latter half of the nineteenth century the railway system in Southern Africa was built more quickly and extensively than the N3 motorway in this century, despite the vast development in technology.

Agar's argument can be summed up in the following words.

"It is only possible to understand the environment if the historical conditions that have contributed to the form and structure of our surroundings are themselves fully comprehended." (Agar, 1973, p. 129).

Reference

AGAR, N. 1973. 'The Place of History in Environmental Education: *Teaching History*, Vol. 3 No. 10 pp. 126 - 129.