

ECOLOGICAL CLUBS FOR CHILDREN (ECCO)

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The Ecological Clubs for Children Organization (ECCO) is an umbrella-body founded to serve the needs of a network of Children's Clubs in the poorer rural sector of the Cape Province. These clubs have as their primary goal the enlargement of their members' experience through the vehicle of environmental education and activities designed to enhance a sense of social responsibility. The history of ECCO, the nature of the communities served, the need for the clubs and some of the problems encountered are discussed.

HISTORY

During 1981/82 eight boys aged 12 or younger from the town of Kleinmond were committed to institutions by the Children's Court because they had engaged in persistent criminal activity (primarily theft). This apparently small number was nevertheless *pro rata* three times the number per thousand of so-called 'coloured' children committed during the same period throughout the Cape Province. (Gannon B. March 1983 pers. comm.).

Kleinmond is a small coastal town situated in a superb natural environment of mountain, sea, estuaries and the richest heart of the Cape Fynbos. In 1982 the total permanent population was 1 600, of whom 1 000 were 'coloured'. It is hardly an urban ghetto and yet it was producing a juvenile crime rate equivalent to the inner-city slums. Concerned citizens from across the entire range of the community came together to consider this problem and by 1983 had formed the Kleinmond Child and Family Welfare Society.

The Society immediately set about attempting to identify community needs. The anticipated, almost statutory problems - poverty-concomitant malnutrition, alcoholism, overcrowded housing, lack of clothing - all were there. Not obvious was the fact that no extra-mural facilities or activities were available to children younger than twelve. The local school did not have the means to provide sport for the under-twelves, there were no playgrounds or playing fields available, and many of the local natural amenities, e.g. beaches and river, were out of bounds in terms of the Separate Amenities Act.

In August 1983 the Child Welfare Society started a club for boys aged 7 - 12. There were 33 original members, meeting weekly. The author took charge of the club and in short order realised that for the club to have continuity and direction, its activities should be thematically based. He chose a twin approach of 'environmental education' and 'social responsibilities' - in quotes because these approaches were necessarily very gently applied, of which more later.

Six months later a similar club for girls was established, and later a youth club for boys and girls aged 13 to 19. By 1985 interest in the Kleinmond clubs had been aroused in neighbouring towns. In April of that year a Boys' Club run on similar lines was established in Greyton. By November there were clubs in Kleinmond, Greyton, Caledon, Stellenbosch, Wellington and Graafwater.

On 23rd November 1985 the organisers from these six towns came together and resolved to establish an umbrella organization which would have as its primary functions the centralized raising of funds, the dissemination of ideas and information, and the founding of new clubs. ECCO was born; the acronym appealed because of the implication of an input and a response, and the word 'ecological' was used according to its dictionary definition as the relationship of an organism to its surroundings, its habits and its lifestyle - for organism i.e. read 'child'.

At the Pilanesberg workshop, organized by EEASA and the CSIR in August 1986, it was reported that ECCO had 19 member-clubs; by July 1987 it had 41 member-clubs with some 2 000 individual members stretching from Cape Town to Kimberley and east to Riversdale. ECCO is an entirely private organization run by a committee of volunteers who represent 16 of the member-clubs. ECCO is a non-racial, non-political organization employing (in 1987) a Director, Secretary and Field Worker. Individual clubs are run by volunteers; child-membership is entirely voluntary: the children pay a small fee for membership. The phenomenal rate of expansion is a sure indicator of the tremendous need for activities of ECCO's kind in all our rural communities.

MEMBERS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

Although ECCO is constitutionally a non-racial organization whose member-clubs are obliged to be open to all children, the founding concept of clubs serving the less-privileged rural children of the Western Cape has meant that some 95% of the present individual membership consists of 'coloured' children. There are about one million such children in the Northern, Western and Southern Cape - a significant number in anyone's terms. Some discussion about who they are in relation to environmental education is necessary.

Firstly, it needs to be clearly understood that although the vast majority of these children enjoy 'third world' living conditions, *their basic cultural matrix is 'first world'*. They do not enjoy any special historical African cultural backgrounds. Prof. R.F. van der Ross writes in his book *Myths and Attitudes*:

"It should be pointed out that the Coloured population group essentially, if not exclusively, follows the life-style known as the Western European culture, and has developed or perpetuated no other form of culture which sets it off distinctively from any other group or groups in South Africa also essentially following the Western European life-style."

(Quoted in Marais 1984).

The colonialist Western culture of which ECCO's members are the co-inheritors contains no specific conservation ethic. Inasmuch as such an ethic has had to be created by concerned individuals and private societies amongst middle-class 'white' people, it has similarly to be created from ground zero amongst the children served by ECCO.

Secondly (and ironically, in the light of the above), a large number of the children involved will follow their parents into occupations which, if not environmentally confrontational, will at least impact upon the environment in various ways e.g. wild flower or other farming, forestry or fishing.

Thirdly, the question of poverty and its most obvious consequence, malnutrition, creates interesting problems in terms of environmental education. Ten per cent of the current boys in the Kleinmond Boys' Club, for example, have less than 60% of the accepted normal body-mass related to their ages - which means effectively that they suffer from kwashiorkor. Eighty per cent fall below the accepted norm - in fact, the average for the whole club falls within the 'danger zone', which is 60-80% of the accepted norm for their ages.

When you take such a group on a rock-pool study, how do you explain why they should not take highly edible but undersized alikreukels (*Turbo saxmaticus*) from the pools? How do you explain to a nine-year-old who stands 1,09m tall and weighs 14kg that he should not go baserk stripping the berries of a blueberry bush (*Diospyros glabra*)?

On a visit to the Cape Province Nature Reserve at De Hoop I was embarrassed to find a few small stragglers who were systematically stripping off every protea flowerhead they could find in order to squeeze them and suck out the nectar.

At what point do you set aside the most basic human needs in favour of nature conservation?

THE NEED FOR ECCO CLUBS

The section above begs the question: but why, if these children are malnourished, do they not go out every day and look for alikreukels, blueberries or proteas?

The answer is, I believe, part of the reason why the concept of ECCO clubs has received such an enthusiastic response throughout the Western Cape.

The communities within which ECCO has become established are effectively isolated communities. Poverty levels dictate that there is a very low degree of personal mobility: families do not own vehicles. Consequently these communities have tended to become inward-looking and the next range of hills is for many the end of the known world. Perhaps the most graphic illustration of this was the recent inaugural camp, held at Kleinmond, of ECCO's first inner-city township club - a group of children from Ravensmead, a suburb of Cape Town. Cape Town is regarded as a coastal city - yet over 30% of the children involved had never seen the sea.

Constraints which must unfortunately be ascribed to politics also apply. Our local underfed children did not go searching the rockpools for alikreukels or the mountainside for blueberries because they firmly believed that they were not *allowed* to go there.

It is very disconcerting to lead a club outing onto the mountainside to look at fynbos in its wonderful and intricate variety, only to find that most of the children are more concerned about whether they will be 'caught' and/or punished for being there, than they are about the beauty around them.

The response to the establishment of ECCO since its founding indicates not only that there exists a powerful need for youth activities in hundreds of small communities: it seems, too, to indicate that there is a strong-felt need to break out of the constraining bonds of the past towards something that offers opportunities for new experiences.

NEW DIRECTION

I put 'environmental education' in an earlier section in quotation marks and explained that this was because the approach was 'gentle'.

A year ago we took 70 members of the Kleinmond Boys' Club to the Potberg Environmental Education Centre of the De Hoop Nature Reserve. The two official instructors there had just said goodbye to 30 demure and well-disciplined Std. 8 pupils from a rather authoritarian city high school.

We arrived in two bakkies and our very dilapidated old farm lorry. Forty kilometres of dusty road from Bredasdorp had ensured that most of the children were filthy; they had been cooped up in that lorry for three hours and they barreled out onto Potberg's expansive lawns with wild cries and much cavorting.

Our twelve-year-olds look like nine-year-olds and our nine-year-olds look like ... well, the official instructors blanched. After moodily showing us around the complex they discreetly asked how old the children were. They left us to prepare our supper and went home muttering.

At the end of the weekend they were changed men. "I have been leading groups for over a year", one enthused. "High school pupils, even botany students - and when they arrived here they knew nothing. Yet your kids seem to know everything! There is no plant, no animal they didn't know about!"

That was very good for my ego, of course, but I explained to him that there were many children in the group who had been in the club for nearly five years. They had had weekly meetings, and had six-weekly simple projects on environmental education related subjects. I was glad that after 250 meetings and nearly 40 projects, at least the older ones had learned something.

Of course they had. Nevertheless the guiding ethos behind ECCO has changed since the early days. We are a young organization, involving many diverse adults and children. Of late I have come to believe that environmental education - a vast and complex field - represents for ECCO ultimate holism, so that inasmuch as we may teach our club the many wonderful things that may be learned about a tortoise, we really have a much broader and simpler goal - the enriching of experience.

In *The Needs of Children* Mia Kellmer Pringle wrote "New experiences are a prerequisite for mental growth - mental growth is as essential to the mind's development as food is for the body's." (Kellmer Pringle 1980 p.41).

That, more than anything else, is what ECCO Clubs are about.

WHAT DO OUR CLUBS DO?

- Hold weekly meetings, usually on a weekday afternoon after school;
- Organize activities for the weekly meetings;
- Set projects on a half-quarterly basis, based on the weekly activities;
- Organize two or three camp-outs during the year;
- Teach their members to swim;
- Report back quarterly to ECCO.

WHAT DOES ECCO DO?

- Organizes training courses for organizers;
- Organizes camps for member-clubs;
- Finds sponsorship for our many needs;
- Publishes regular newsletters and information booklets for members;
- Gives financial support to clubs when necessary (each child subscribes about 30% of his own 'cost' to the club);
- Equips each child with a T-shirt;
- Employs a field worker to give regular support to as many clubs as possible;
- Gives lectures and slide-shows to potential donors and potential clubs.

PROBLEMS

Effective and willing adult organizers are the chief limitation upon growth. We have 41 clubs now - since 1985 three clubs have collapsed because the organizers have left. Organizers need to be trained towards an effective environmental education ethic and this we attempt through regular training courses - but not everyone is always able to attend.