

Starting Local

- teaching conservation from a local perspective

by Maggie Esson, Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust

Year Six primary school teachers in three islands – Jersey, Mauritius and Madagascar – were interviewed to ascertain the extent to which they were able to teach conservation from a local perspective, in support of the Agenda 21 ‘Think global. Act local’ mantra. Agenda 21 was one of the outcomes of the Convention on Biological Diversity at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, 1992. The governments of Jersey, Mauritius and Madagascar are signatories and each government department responsible for education advocates the teaching of conservation education in support of the ‘Think Global. Act Local’ approach.

Year Six is the last year of primary school. Teachers were selected from this year to achieve a measure of commonality across the three islands. Jersey is the only island of the three where secondary education is compulsory. In Mauritius, education is free and compulsory between the ages of five and 12 only. In Madagascar, six years of primary education is free and compulsory and must be taken somewhere between the ages of six and 13. Data were collected in Jersey in March and in Mauritius and Madagascar in June. These months correspond to the same period in the school year. All schools were mixed-sex and located in urban settings. Nineteen teachers were interviewed, individually and in confidence, across the three islands.



in Mauritius, school outings to the ocean are rare



pupils are often distanced from nature



teachers are concerned by high rates of absenteeism in Madagascar

Table 1.
Number of teachers interviewed in each island

Island	No. schools	No. interviews
Jersey	4	6
Mauritius	6	9
Madagascar	3	4

Interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes were on a one-to-one basis and held in private. They began with a short questionnaire to act as an icebreaker and begin the process of building trust.

Question 1.

Effective conservation education should reflect the environment of the learner

	Strongly Agree	Moderately Agree	Ambivalent	Moderately Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Jersey	4	1	-	1	-
Mauritius	8	1	-	-	-
Madagascar	3	1	-	-	-

Question 2.

Conservation education should start from local and extend to global

	Strongly Agree	Moderately Agree	Ambivalent	Moderately Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Jersey	5	1	-	-	-
Mauritius	8	1	-	-	-
Madagascar	4	-	-	-	-

Question 3.

Learners are less likely to value their local environment when local conservation issues are not represented in the schemes of work

Table 2.
Teachers' answers to questionnaire

	Strongly Agree	Moderately Agree	Ambivalent	Moderately Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Jersey	5	1	-	-	-
Mauritius	6	3	-	-	-
Madagascar	4	-	-	-	-

Jersey

Overwhelmingly, teachers felt that the focus of Year Six was to prime pupils for Standard Attainment Tests (SATs). Consequently, core subjects and attainment levels in those subjects were all that teachers could focus on until after the SATs in May.

Despite this powerfully perceived pressure that Year Six was a revision and consolidation year for pupils, teachers did feel strongly that conservation should be built into the curriculum long-term, in primary education. They were broadly in agreement that conservation could be introduced in earlier years in primary schools and that there was potential for cross-curricular links, particularly with science, geography, personal, social and health education and citizenship. Teachers acknowledged that there is flexibility in the curriculum to teach conservation from a local perspective and quoted the units, 'Comparing islands', 'Where we live', 'Our neighbourhood' and 'The world around us' as examples. However, they felt cautious about testing that flexibility since, by closely following schemes of work, they could be confident that attainment targets would be reached. This was more important than pursuit of 'discreet subjects', however important they may be in an holistic educational sense.

Teachers were asked about their awareness of locally specific teaching resources. Getting the children into the local environment as an active learning experience was considered of prime importance. However, teachers suggested that primary education had moved away from trips and towards classroom-based subjects. Teachers expressed regret that opportunities for out of school activities were less frequent than in the past. Locally specific resources for classroom-based conservation education were considered to be lacking. Some teachers opportunistically included locally specific conservation education through personal contacts and by scanning local media. This tended to be embarked upon late in the summer term, after SATs, so rather than being an integral part of pupil learning, local conservation was tackled as an add-on.

Teachers also commented on changing patterns of family activities, especially at weekends. This opinion was based on Monday morning discussion sessions with their pupils, where children were asked to talk about or write about what they did over the weekend. Familiarity with television programming and access to the

Internet and computer games was convincingly demonstrated. In contrast, pupils very rarely reported that they had been involved in family outings, such as walks or beachcombing. Flexible working hours, both parents working, single parent families and TV and video were cited by teachers as reasons for diminishing exposure to local environment and understanding of local conservation needs. It was suggested that the opportunity for children to learn about their own environment was no longer available in school or in the home.

Mauritius

Six primary schools were visited in Mauritius: one private, two religious (fee-paying and government assisted) and three government schools. Nine teachers were interviewed.

During interviews with all the Mauritius teachers a strong sense of wanting to teach about the flora and fauna of their island was revealed. However, like their colleagues in Jersey, teachers from some schools expressed concerns about the already crowded curriculum and the pressure to teach with the specific aim of getting children through the public examination, the Certificate in Primary Education (CPE). Unless pupils pass the CPE they cannot continue with secondary education. Overwhelmingly, they did not believe they could justify teaching any subject or topic that was not currently examinable.

The extent to which they were able to teach from a local perspective was also controlled to some degree by the syllabus. The curriculum encouraged a materialistic set of values and national heritage was seen as rather a poor relation. Some teachers felt that the curriculum was directed towards cultivating the image of Mauritius as a prosperous and developed nation and gave examples. Geography is taught through learning the 34 countries to which Air Mauritius flies. Environmental education focuses on the sugar cane industry and school outings are more likely to visit sugar cane refineries or textile factories, than the shoreline or forests. All teachers believed that school outings were important in helping to develop values about conservation and the environment.

Teachers expressed concern that value for the environment was not being reinforced in the home and any work undertaken in school tended to be undone in the wider community. Teachers believed that parental endorsement was very

important in supporting the values that schools were trying to instill.

Teachers believed there is an opportunity within the curriculum to explore conservation from a local perspective but felt there were few resources available to achieve this. Different teachers employed various strategies. Some schools had 'green corners' and pupils were encouraged to care for plants. Reviewing the media as a basis for class discussion of local environmental issues was employed. Most teachers advocated the cross-curricular approach though few felt able to practice it. Some suggested that there was a drive to learn about other countries and that the global perspective was perceived as having more value and prestige than pupils learning about their own country.

Madagascar

Three government schools were visited and four teachers were interviewed.

Teachers believed that learning about the environment was important and agreed that the local perspective was the preferred approach and had practical benefits for children. Although supporting concepts relating to values and respect towards the environment and animals, teachers were realistically frank in expressing their views about the magnitude of the task. Classroom resources are scarce and pupils are required to supply their own notebooks and writing materials. This was seen as a major stumbling block to all learning, since many parents are unable to provide such materials due to uncertain employment. Lack of materials was given as one reason for high absenteeism from school.

Teachers also expressed concern about the lack of parental support for environmental education, stating that what was achieved during the week at school was often undone at weekends by the culture of the home environment. Parents rarely encouraged pupils to complete their homework. One teacher described a Monday morning school activity in the form of competitions, run in classes and based on the environmental activities pupils had participated in over the weekend. Prizes are either exercise books and pencils or a free snack at the school kiosk. The stark reality of a child being asked to choose between learning and eating is revealed.

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Discussion

Agenda 21 clearly sets out the benefits of putting local issues into a global context. However, this principle does not appear to translate into classroom practice. Teachers in all three islands have spoken with the authority of what is real.

The reality of teaching Year Six pupils in Jersey is that there is little time for any topic or activity that does not focus attention on the SATs. This sentiment was mirrored by teachers in the elite schools of Mauritius, where teaching according to examination content was also the practical reality of Year Six.

Teachers in the government schools in Mauritius and Madagascar were clearly wrestling with many social and administrative problems. For example, teachers affirmed their belief that much of their work in raising environmental awareness was undone as pupils were exposed to family values that conflicted with those taught in school.

Teachers in all three islands demonstrated enthusiasm for teaching conservation from a local perspective and working from local to global issues in their schemes of work. It seems that there is room for manoeuvre on the part of teachers who are prepared to take calculated risks and are able to resource topic work written from a local perspective. However, most teachers appeared to be conservative in interpreting curriculum orders for fear of poor achievement by pupils in examinations. Teachers also expressed regret that pressure to teach what is examinable has resulted in distancing pupils from nature and animals.

It seems that teachers also lack resources. This suggests that the efforts of NGOs should be directed at working with teachers to devise schemes of work that are locally relevant to the curriculum. This may be more effective than producing resources directly for pupils. A consultative process that allows teachers and NGOs to explore ways in which 'back yard' conservation can be integrated across curriculum subjects may have an advantage over the isolation of local conservation as a subject in its own right. This approach may also result in status for the topic and create opportunities for schools to support the 'local action' ideal.

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