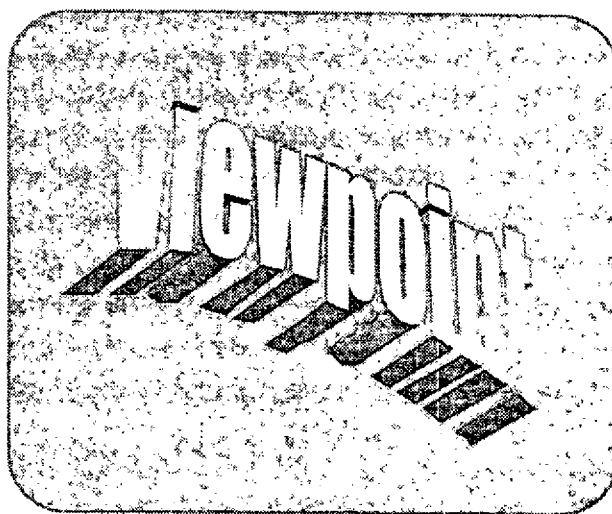


Fourteen Facets to the Character of an Effective Environmental Educator

Ken Rubeli

Wangat Lodge, Dungog New South Wales



Feet clenched stiff
 The watch-bird lies
 Beneath the perch
 Where yesterday was song.
 But yet the pick strikes
 And the charges blast,
 Chainsaws chatter, ploughs churn,
 Suburbs flow like lava
 To take all that is there to take,
 To leave in space once wild and vibrant
 Silence, emptiness that
 We, humanity, fill with our noise
 To drown in dull cacophony
 The farewell serenade;
 To blunder blindly past
 The signal sacrifice.
 And so we stifle in
 Our spheric cage.
 What might survive to watch
 Our fall from grace?
 Too sensitive the frail canary;
 Let the cockroach claim the Earth
 And peck flesh
 From our curled up toes.

This is not an academic paper. I write in the first person. And I write out of my own experience - not as a researcher but as a practitioner. So perhaps this is more like a letter, from one imperfect practitioner to others.

I live in a region of Australia where the main industry is coal mining. I and a partner run a small environmental education centre at the end of the farmland and the beginning of the forest in a peaceful and beautiful valley. I am privileged to work with around a thousand young people each year - mostly

9-12-year-olds. They and the living world of the forest where I live, are my teachers. The greatest joy of my work is that it is an endless process of learning and sharing: such is the vocation of an environmental educator. Children come to Wangat Lodge for three or four days. They come in groups of around thirty to forty - small enough for me to learn all of their names. We spend most of our time outdoors. I talk too much; I know they gain most when they are discovering things for themselves. We sing. We walk. We mime. We dance. We act. We write bad poetry. I could not wish for more fulfilling work.

I first came in to this kind of work in Malaysia, in a National Park called Taman Negara. This place was the main focus of my life for ten years. For me it remains the most wonderful place on Earth. In 1979 I was involved in the building of a simple Nature Study Centre there. It was eaten by termites. But enough students passed through for me to feel that young people are the same wherever you go. They are inquisitive. That is all that an educator in my position needs. That and commitment.

Taman Negara was set up in the late 1930's. The prime force in its establishment was a rubber planter and reformed hunter named Theodore Hubback. In those colonial times a man's status was measured by the number of tigers and elephants he had shot and how many bits of them he had draped around his living room. Hubback decided enough was enough, and urged that there should be a limit to how much land the colonial planters cleared for rubber plantations and oil palm, and how much wildlife was shot. He was ostracised by his fellow planters. But his commitment was unshakeable. He convinced royalty in three Malay States that huge tracts of wilderness should be protected, and together they achieved it. Generations since have kept it that way, to their immense credit. Hubback was certainly an environmental educator, and there are plenty today who work in no less hostile and seemingly intransigent circumstances. What makes an effective environmental educator? My feeling is that it does not demand great intelligence, nor a profound knowledge of anything in particular, nor a Masters Degree in this or that: these may

help some educators, but impede others.

I suggest it demands instead an uncommon assortment of quite ordinary attributes and life experiences in a recipe of uncertain ingredients and unsure quantities. Like the best cooking, if it works, it is good. Perhaps there is a life path, a pattern of personal development that progressively equips us to be more committed and more successful as an environmental educator. What follows can be read as whimsical thoughts to lightly entertain, or considered hypotheses to stimulate discussion and analysis, as you wish. I set out fourteen characters (in no particular order) and suggest that in our own development as educators for sustainability we might fruitfully work to foster in ourselves an understanding of a little of each.

The conquering hero: An environmental educator can benefit from a shameful past

The converted seem always to attest with the most passion. A past involving a commitment to dominion over nature or indulgences particularly wasteful of the planet's non-renewable resources offers a poignant history for an environmental educator to recount. (Formula One racing would be ideal, or a pivotal part in the Gulf War.) It might only be a few kangaroos shot in one's youth, or a flirtation with high-powered boats and water-skiing, or the possession of shares in an environmentally irresponsible mining company, but it is enough to be the genesis of a change of heart.

There is a force of ambition encouraged in most of us at some stage to establish control or dominance, to strive to win, to claim a few trophies for the wall. It may reveal itself in the way we raise our children, or pursue a promotion, or deal with pests in the vegetable garden, or negotiate a way through a traffic roundabout. Certainly in the culture of our corporations-and political systems there is much more evidence of power and aggression than of harmonious interaction. In a developed world founded on the conquering of 'new' lands the ethos remains pervasive: that humanity must bring nature under its control by the imposition of a new order, by the replacement or augmentation of natural processes with technological processes.

As environmental educators it does us no harm to have served an apprenticeship as a part of this ethos. If no such embarrassments exist in our past we should take steps to sample a little of life at the wasteful and indulgent ends of society: try a trip to the drag races or a night at the casino! We communicate best with those whose culture (or sub-culture) we understand. We might of course find avenues of endeavor for conquering heroes which can work in support of nature rather than against it: exploration in search of new species; pioneering walking trails in new National Parks and reserves; hunting feral animals, fighting bushfires.

The academic: An environmental educator is aided by a formal understanding of natural history

A course of study in botany, zoology or ecology is an obvious prerequisite for an environmental educator working in the natural environment. It is less directly applicable should we be working in areas like factory emission regulation, domestic waste management or building design, though all these do ultimately impinge upon nature and natural processes. An understanding of the fundamental processes of nature helps in whatever field an environmental educator works. The photosynthetic process in a leaf is a fine metaphor for the way human beings might strive to live. I have particular pleasure in the term 'natural history' because I am fortunate enough to live in a place where it is accessible. I can walk children to one part of the forest and say 'Look around, tell me what you can read of human history'. They will identify roads and picnic areas and stumps from logging. Then a kilometre away I can sit them down for a minute's silence in a place where there is no sign whatever of any human interference, ever. 'Here', I say, 'we can read only natural history'.

A day in the tropical rain forest in Taman Negara with the Batek people who have lived there for generations, or some time in the arid centre of Australia with Pitjantjantjara people whose songs and dances describe the shaping of their land, is a particularly powerful educative experience: here one absorbs natural history where a human element is an integral part of a stable, sustainable natural world. A graduate in science may not have begun to learn what the Batek or Pitjantjantjara know, but they will surely appreciate better than most that nature is extraordinarily complex beyond human understanding, and, most importantly, can function perfectly well in the total absence of *Homo sapiens*.

The non-conformist: Environmental educators need the courage to be different

Ride a bicycle to work? Patch your clothes rather than throw them away? Opt to be a vegetarian? Refuse to buy from fast-food chains? Use long-distance trains rather than aeroplanes? We're not in the mainstream if we behave this way, and often we are called upon to justify our actions. But non-conformity, with time and practice, actually begins to feel like the norm and it is not us but the other people, the mainstream, who become the focus of embarrassment. In time friends and colleagues in the mainstream cease to question the lifestyle choices of the environmentalist and begin to appreciate that there might be a certain calm and confidence that comes from following one's beliefs rather than following the herd. 'I wish I had the courage to do that...' is a frank response of quiet admiration towards someone holding firmly to their idealism, and it is at this point that we know our non-conformity is showing signs of contagiousness.

One of the greater challenges of course faces mothers and fathers in encouraging children to display the sort of non-conformity that might contribute to the well-being of the planet rather than the kind inclined to threaten its well-being and that of their parents and teachers! Reference to any book on

parenting will reveal the comforting paragraphs asserting that while there may be years spent astray there is a strong likelihood that attitudes of caring parents commonly resurface in matured offspring. For the environmental educator an area of difficulty emerges where non-conformity may prove counter-productive in getting a message across. Having buried one's collection of neckties or stiletto-heeled shoes as farcically uncomfortable trappings of corporate rapaciousness, do we resurrect them for that Rotary Club speaking engagement or the meeting with the politician? Does it in fact help our cause if they think, 'Well I thought she was a radical but at least she looks presentable...'??

The altruist: An environmental educator needs a motherly disposition

For many of us the years of our lives where we are first earning a salary are the most selfish. It is the time when most people carry least responsibility and behave with least responsibility. It is probably, in the western world at least, the time when we waste the most of the planet's resources and care least. I suggest that only an exceptional few people at this stage of life are suited to being environmental educators. Those few have learned altruism: we reap what we sow, therefore sow (or perhaps the less generous definition: a form of selfishness that benefits others). Altruism isn't generally something one actively sets out to achieve. It just sneaks up on us if we are lucky. Most mothers have lots of it. The job of caring for a planet has many similarities to the job of motherhood.

Environmental educators have to be altruists. We can't be clock-watchers or salary obsessives or status seekers. Yes it does border on the maternalistic, but we have a higher calling that says the job is for the planet, the job is for the next generation and those thereafter, the job is something we do because we want to do it, we need to do it, and others need us to do it for them and with them. Without us they may well just roll on until they learn by a much more painful means.

The disciple: An environmental educator gains strength from someone to lean on

Twice now I have attended workshops run by Steve Van Matre. I have a special regard for Steve Van Matre because when I first joined Malaysia's Department of Wildlife and National Parks in 1976 there was a Peace Corps volunteer there who told me about Van Matre's books *Acclimatization* and *Acclimatizing*. Van Matre was the guru of the time if you were interested in getting other people interested in nature; so I sent away for the books, and read them. It gave me a nucleus. I translated some of Van Matre's ideas into the Malaysian rainforest and they worked quite well.

Steve Van Matre nowadays is the force behind a sort of franchising idea for environmental education packages, very carefully, sequentially structured, and with an impressive array of creative apparatus to help young people understand natural processes and the human element in the present-day state of

the planet. Anyone can learn to present these packages, to be a disciple of a great teacher who has been able to neatly bundle his ideas for international dissemination. I have no doubt that many disciples are able to generate ample enthusiasm to convey Van Matre's message. If they are able to attain this level, to present effectively the package and to do it better and better with more experience, then they are playing a valuable role as environmental educators.

I suffered a motorcycle accident on my way to one of Steve's workshops and could barely walk. Steve carries a walking stick, but I judged, given his sprightly energy, that this was more for effect than as a necessity. When he took us out for some activity in the forest I tentatively asked could I borrow his stick so I could take part. He very kindly agreed. In my current work I don't consciously translate Van Matre's ideas into my programs but I've no doubt the support and comfort of his principles is there and somehow makes the way easier. Most environmental educators draw on a variety of sources of inspiration and sustenance. If it is good medicine always keep the bottle handy.

The performer: An environmental educator requires the attention-grabbing power of a TV commercial

At Wangat Lodge I have been known to delude myself, at the end of a four-day residential program, that I have made an impact on these children that will affect the rest of their lives. But I forget that in a couple of hours they will be home, and the first thing they will do is turn on the television.

How much are we worth in terms of residual impact? What can we do that will break through to brains that are dulled by served-on-a-platter, involvement-free, thought-process anaesthesia? Relative to television, for those of us working 'live' there is one extra dimension at our disposal and at least two more senses. We need to generate a participatory sort of performance, to involve the audience physically, sensually and emotionally. There -are real hands there and it helps hugely if they are hands *on*. Face-to-face environmental educators have the perfect excuse to work outdoors, and we have the latitude to employ all manner of props not available in a classroom.

A day or two at a workshop on mime, percussion, public speaking, yoga, *a cappella* singing, origami, tap-dancing, drama, or stand-up comedy.... any of these and many more can provide the inspiration and courage for an activity that is altogether unexpected, and unusually involving. And fun. If there isn't a laugh here and there, it very likely won't work. If we're going to change people's lives we need to do so with good humour. If it's all too serious... it's back to the television. For two reasons, I believe it is important that our face-to-face performance be flexible, to a framework rather than a script. This allows adaptation to the audience, and flow with the feeling of the moment - a special vitality. And because we can't quite predict what will fill the framework each time, we are always a little on edge, relying on spontaneity to keep it

all on the right course. Because it is never easy, it never gets boring or repetitive.

The ascetic: An environmental educator benefits from times of doing without

There is no question that we must learn to do with less. Given our finite supplies of fossil fuels and the limited applicability of alternative energy systems that we will come to depend upon, there will be enough for all only if each can reduce their consumption. To achieve this while maintaining the essentials of life and a few small comforts is the enormous challenge laid at the feet of educators for sustainability. When the cost of petrol rises there is always some wiseacre who says if we buy a smaller car, drive it gently and only use it when we really have to then we won't spend more on fuel, we'll spend less. When in times of drought the reservoirs run low we are greeted with television commercials advising smart ways to live well enough with less. When a war brings rationing and all manner of disturbance to a comfortable lifestyle, people show remarkable resilience and ingenuity to make do with very little.

The reality is that when the crunch comes we somehow cope, and should circumstances return to normal we often find there remains a respect for the frugal patterns of living we have learnt. How often do we neglect the simple and natural for the complex and technological? There are those who will fly to the other side of the Earth to spend their vacation in a plush resort that offers all the luxuries of home and much more. And there are some among us who by choice put limited resources on our backs and walk off into the wilderness, braving tough terrain and unknown weather, sleeping on the ground, perhaps pencilling our feelings in a notebook.

It's not hard to make a list of ways we might sample the ascetic life, to step out from time to time from our comfort zone and hone our appreciation of a more fundamental way of living. Join Australian Volunteers International for a couple of years. Set off for a month on a bicycle. Take the family camping to Mootwingee or the Flinders Ranges or the Grampians. Spend some time each year at some chosen retreat. To go alone compounds the benefit. Most affecting of all is to spend time travelling, or better still working, in a country very different from our own. Towards one end of the scale we learn how little some people need to be contented, and towards the other, how much some people can waste - and then waste more in futile search for contentment. A core element of environmental education is encouragement to live simply and fulfillingly, closer to nature. It can't be enough to speak from other people's experience.

The generalist: An environmental educator can afford to be ignorant about nothing

Where the focus of environmental education is on the natural world, the educator cannot afford to say 'Oh I can't tell you about snails, I'm a botanist!' But it's fine to say 'Snails? I've

got a book about them somewhere, we'll see what it says...' And after ten years on the job and a thousand questions about things you knew little about, you find you come to know something about almost anything.

For me, working in Taman Negara was the best education any naturalist could have. On the one hand there were the Batek people who could tell me quite a lot about anything in the rain forest. And on the other hand there were researchers and other experts who came to Park Headquarters, who were happy to have me tag along with them as a volunteer. And in return for carrying their 38kg battery-powered bat detector up and down several mountains at night in the rain I would hear all there was to know about the mega- and micro-chiropterans of South East Asia! And from the next expert I might learn about termites or aroids or hornbills or gingers.... Plus there was the advantage that most of the Park visitors knew very little about tropical rain forest. And most of them asked the same questions. If you could answer those with authority, and throw in an odd comment about bats, termites, aroids, hornbills or gingers, they had no doubt you were a walking encyclopaedia on anything the rain forest could offer!

So that's fine, but then you get asked about the ozone layer, or uranium mining, or logging in the Solomon Islands, or gas pipelines, or genetically engineered soya beans.... Because, after all, you are an environmental educator. Is there an end to it? No! Environmental education reaches into all disciplines. Yet our knowledge need not plumb great depths. Most important is that we are abreast of current affairs and know where to easily find more information. Or if we are in the company of those more knowledgeable than ourselves we are humble and able to ask the right questions.

The warrior/defender: An environmental educator can use a few battle scars

It is regrettable that defence of the environment so often ends up as one side against the other, rather than a whole grey range of options from which a wise course might be chosen. People feel passionately one way or the other and few dare speak up for the middle ground. One great benefit from involvement in an environmental conflict is the experience of this fervour and angst. This level of emotion is a wonderful, powerful thing. That it may lead to behaviour beyond rationality is a fact of life. It is something environmental educators understand best if it is part of their own history.

Another great benefit from involvement in an environmental conflict is that we begin to learn how the other side thinks. Mining company executives in Australia are nowadays sitting down and talking with Aboriginal elders. As a result they are environmentally and culturally educating themselves and their staff towards more sensitive dealings with the people for whom the land is so much more than rock and minerals and profits. It might not be all bad for the Aboriginal people either. Environmental activists are buying shares and making their views heard at company Annual General Meetings. If the

warriors come away with a greater awareness of what it is that drives the corporate world than that is an education in itself: There is a greater likelihood each can speak the other's language, understand their sensitivities, and perhaps find a path to an alternative solution. Better to be there at the front than to hear about it on the news.

The preacher: An environmental educator needs at times to be a kind of evangelist

Most of us preach, so even if, mercifully, we have learned to preach rarely, we should at least preach well. 'Intrusive moralising' is one definition I found for preaching. If as environmental educators we are trying to change the way people live their lives and change the way industries run their businesses; if we are telling governments it is immoral to leave to the generation that follows us a planet, an ecosphere, in markedly poorer condition than we found it; then we may well need the service of those who can effectively preach.

For some of course to be demonstrative is not the way. There are those who achieve an inner calm through a closeness to the natural world, through meditation, through religious adherence and practice, or perhaps a combination of these. There is a serenity and containment such that others can *sense* the commitment, the joy in living simply and in such minimal disharmony. Words may have insufficient meaning. To proselytise on the source of inner calm may threaten the calm itself. I personally have been slow to come to an acceptance that the process of environmental campaigning benefits from the presence of both the demonstrative and the radiant. Success, I now appreciate, seems most often to arise from the involvement of both. Both have an admirable power. Yet there are times when though we feel like one we must act like the other.

Television advertising is a grim reminder that the more we rant about the product we wish to sell the more stressful it is for both the ranter and the captive audience. There are environmentalists who find themselves labelled as fanatic and an alienating bore. But might not a bit of strategic involvement in intrusive moralising be valuable in our apprenticeship towards being an effective environmental educator? It may be a letter to the editor. It may be an address to the local school. It may be a submission to the government. It may be a speech on the steps of Parliament. How persuasive it is when presented with a balance of substance and emotion appropriate to the occasion. If we have strong feelings on an issue we should learn to be effective in expressing them directly and publicly if need be. We are a voice for the planet. If we don't speak out who will?

The politician: An environmental educator needs wisdom and foresight

Would you believe my dictionary's definition of *politic* is 'sagacious, prudent, foresightful, not impulsive'?! Politicians may not always be all these things, but as environmental

educators it is clear we need to be politic. There needs to be careful avoidance of the rash generalisation, the blanket statement. There needs to be attention to the background, the position and particular interest of one's audience. It is not enough to present with fervour our ideas and feelings; we need to look ahead to consider how our ideas and feelings will be received.

A simple example would be the groups of schoolchildren who come to Wangat Lodge. I might easily say that we burn too much fossil fuel, and a good starting point would be to cut back our electricity consumption - because our electricity comes from coal-fired power stations. But some of the children come from families where the breadwinner is a coal-miner; or works in the power station. So I need to talk positively about alternatives, about solar hot water services, compact fluorescent lights, woolly hats and other forms of good insulation and the jobs that are created when demand for these rises.... It is so easy to be impulsively critical. Criticism should be a carefully wrapped parcel. To offer clear and realistic alternatives within that parcel is the politic way in environmental education. We must see into the future and understand the consequences of what we propose. We need to set out a path forwards so people aren't made to feel foolish about what they are doing now, but rather can decide for themselves to work in ways that are less damaging to the planet - not because they are bludgeoned into it, but because they are applying their own foresight and are making changes because they feel better in themselves for doing so.

The enthuser: An environmental educator needs contagious enthusiasm

The Greek *enthousiasmos* means 'a god-inspired zeal'. How do we get it, short of godly recourse? I can only suggest that it, of these fourteen characters, may be the one that depends largely upon experience and appreciation of the others. Enthusiasm I see as a directed sort of cheerfulness. At its contagious best it is almost an aura, another of those radiating forces that somehow draws people in to an acceptance that what you have to say is really worth listening to, or even acting upon. If we truly enjoy our work, our enthusiasm shines through. It is a wonderfully capable author who can convey contagious enthusiasm through the printed word. It is a - perhaps a little less difficult for a photographer, or a documentary film director. It is easiest face to face, and this, obviously, is where environmental education works best.

Somehow out of all the bad news that might spur us to be an environmental educator, out of all that will surely convince us that humanity on Earth is in a terrible downward spiral, still in the enthusiastic person there bubbles up an irrational positivity. This is the greatest strength we have, our greatest hope for the future, that however bleak the circumstances, human beings do have an extraordinary will to survive, to find a way. And leaders always emerge, with a contagious enthusiasm for the task. Others prefer to tuck themselves away in a little-known backwater, unambitious, just enjoying doing

in a very small way what they feel they do well. As environmental educators we each have our place and our own special skills; and more than anything else it is our commitment and our enthusiasm that dictates the response we achieve.

The naturalist: An environmental educator should feel at home wrapped up in nature

It is conceivable that a person might feel strongly about the impact of humanity on the environment yet feel ill at ease even in those wild places closest to home. But it is much less conceivable that the person at ease in the wilderness will be unconcerned about the state of the planet.

My father took me as a small child into the mountain ash magnificence of Sherbrooke Forest. From Melbourne suburbia we would journey to a guesthouse on the edge of the forest, and at dawn set off in search of lyrebirds. For my father this forest was a solace, these walks a rejuvenation. More than once we watched at close quarters the whole performance of a male lyrebird on its dancing mound. What better environmental education could any child wish for?

For those brought up in cities it takes a conscious effort to get out and experience wild places. It takes perhaps many encounters to gain confidence in dealing with discomforts and dangers, in coping with inclement weather, in safely navigating, in freeing mindspace for inquisitiveness and awe. Only a tiny proportion of our society finds pleasure in camping beyond the cheek-by-jowl coastal camping ghettos. How many environmental educators can truly say they commune with nature? Yet if they do then they know first hand the benchmark: this is the way we once were. For Australians the opportunity is still there in easy reach. But as our society becomes more indolent, less prepared to endure discomfort, less willing to accept any form of risk outside a motor vehicle or gambling venue, fewer and fewer people venture beyond the roadside car park and barbecue. The more separate we are from nature the less likely we will voluntarily take steps to conserve and protect nature. We fight most passionately for what we know most intimately.

The chronic hypocrite: An environmental educator will never quite practise what they preach

One of the important messages to convey in environmental education is that every course of action has an environmental balance sheet, and in modern society there is virtually nothing we can do that does not generate a loss. Solar energy is free but the solar collector on our roof requires non-renewable resources for its manufacture. My bicycle generates no pollution but its manufacture does. My daughter's piano playing requires no electricity but we opt to drive her 23 km for her lessons!

The important line to be drawn is that between wants and needs. For most of us it is a fuzzy line, but there is doubtless,

somewhere, an environmental educator who lives wholly by her or his principles. Perhaps I am seeking to rationalise my own conspicuous inadequacies, but are inadequacies not a useful tool for the environmental educator? Presented in the right way, admitted and discussed, they allow us to be seen as not so different from those with whom we work. We too have faults. We are urging for the adoption of a process. It is vital to be seen to be applying that process in our own lives, but it is comforting to our audience if we too confess to be struggling with some aspects of the challenge.

I am struggling at present over the building of a house. I have never before owned the house in which I lived. My wife and family and friends and the Tax Department urge that it's the best investment I can make for my retirement. (Can an environmental educator ever retire?!) So we have moved out of the small and generally satisfactory house we inexpensively rented, into a new one which, for all we care about the planet, has, in the course of its construction consumed a small mountain of non-renewable natural resources. The particular hypocrisy for me is that it was a 'want' rather than a conspicuous 'need'. There are various aspects of the building that I find hard to justify, but there are not only my wishes to be considered. Nevertheless, relative to the sort of houses most Australians build, our house sets a good example in thermal mass, insulation, ventilation, passive solar features, and careful landscaping. The house is designed never to require high-consumption appliances for heating or cooling, and it should last for centuries with minimal maintenance. What has proved serendipitous is that we now have Building Construction Management students from Newcastle University coming to Wangat Lodge as part of the Ecologically Sustainable Development component of their course. I take the students on inspections of some exemplary houses in the district, and some less exemplary ones. Our house now has an educative role as one of those inspected, and my hypocrisy is bared for discussion.

Conclusion

It is of course possible that an environmental educator might step by step pass through all these realms of personal development, and would I believe be all the better an environmental educator for it. Any teacher benefits from a Diploma of Education, ten years in the classroom and some good role models... But of course some teachers, with all this behind them, will be inherently better in the classroom than others. Similarly not all environmental educators delight in the company of children or excel in person-to-person communication. They will do best in other roles - in conserving our natural heritage, in developing educational resources, in administering environmental organisations, in drafting legislation or in enforcing it.

In so many situations, an individual can be supporting public education for sustainability. If I am urging for my company's breakfast cereal pack to carry stories about endangered species; if I am collecting my neighbours' biodegradable refuse for

composting; if I am the person scouring the rubbish dump for recyclables and repairables, if I am a factory worker pointing out ways to cut energy consumption; if I am a singer with a care-for-the-planet song or two in my repertoire; if I am a chemistry lecturer infusing an environmental flavour into the subject; if I am a parent influencing what is sold in the school canteen; if I am a grandmother talking about the frugal ways of my childhood.

If we are naturally gregarious, have a wonderful sense of humour, are blessed with a creative mind, or have a charisma and gift of presentation that draws people to our ideas, then perhaps we have a more 'up front' role to play in environmental education. But alas, far more likely in our consumer society such a person will be dreaming up brilliant promotions for pet food or four-wheel drives, or will be a salesperson for jet-skis, or will be on television hosting a quiz show sponsored by a fast food company, or will, for better or worse, be a politician.

Steve Van Matre is a bit of all of these 'salespeople', and quite unashamed to be employing some of their persuasive ways in his chosen role as an environmental educator. He says if it makes people question the way they are going, then it is worth doing. Finding the right person, or being the right person, to be involved in environmental education is unusually difficult. Contrast with finding a person to teach mathematics, or history, or computer programming or accounting. These are not unimportant subjects, but if the teaching is mediocre the message will still be understood well enough. These are not subjects on which depends the future of life on earth as we know it. Environmental education is. A mediocre approach may bring about understanding but is unlikely to inspire action.

The warning signs are manifest. The canary is teetering on its perch. If we are unable to inspire remedial action, then as environmental educators we are failing in our mission. 🐦