

Politics of protection — wetlands

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Abstract

Protection of threatened or degraded environments such as wetlands is not simply a matter of asserting the right ecological viewpoint. Rather it is a matter of carefully planned community action aimed at Local, State and Federal levels of government. The form which that community action takes is crucial to the long-term effectiveness of protection efforts.

Achieving effective management of any valuable natural resource is ultimately a political exercise. Education is a vital component in the equation if the political processes are to produce a workable approach to protective management of resources. However, the role of the educator is often poorly defined. The confusion that results leads many educators to either avoid involvement, particularly in controversial issues, or to compound community polarisation by taking a relatively extreme position with respect to the continuum of community opinion on the issue. Whilst

such situations in terms of the 'political continuum model' presented diagrammatically in Figure 1.

For the purpose of the model, the range of public opinion on any hypothetical environmental issue is assumed to be represented by a normal distribution curve between the extremes of totally disregarding ecological considerations on the one hand and a preservationist approach on the other. If the politician is to survive more than a single term, his or her position on most issues must be on, or close to the crest of the curve.

There can be no doubt that environmental educators should be positioned firmly on the right hand side of the graph. The exact position taken will vary from issue to issue as well as with the personality and approach of the individual educator. However, it is important to register that an educator adopting a position close to the right hand extreme will be implicitly enunciating a 'correct', perhaps 'righteous' answer on the issue, but may suffer a lack of credibility with the majority of the population.

The Myall Lakes boating controversy in the summer of 1984-85 provides a useful example (Strike, 1985).

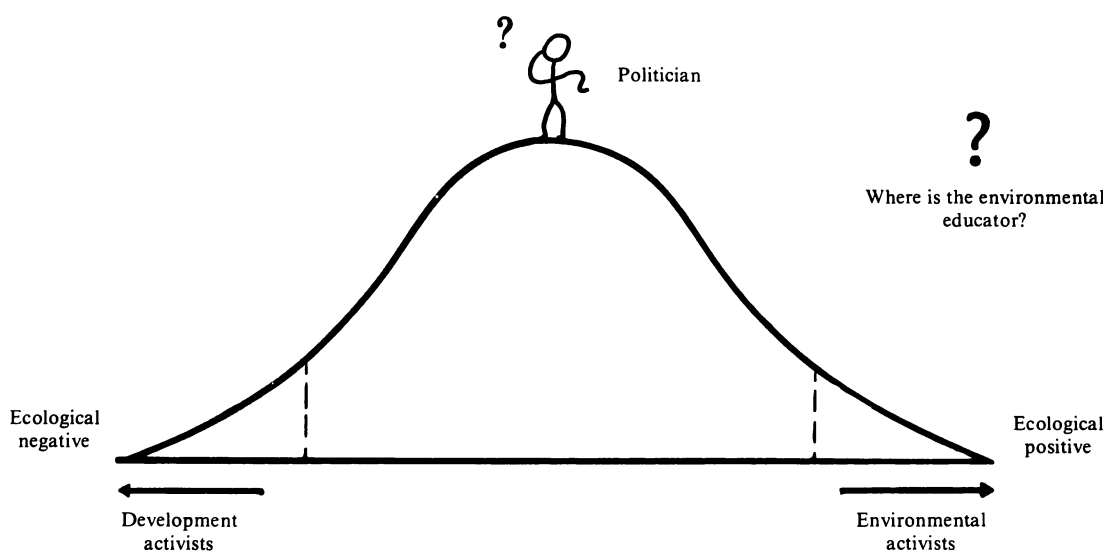


Figure 1:
Political Continuum Model of Community Views on a hypothetical environmental issue.

the latter approach may appear to be the ecologically 'righteous' path and may, at times, produce a 'satisfactory' resolution of the specific issue, the broader and longer-term consequences for community environmental education may be negative.

I have found it convenient to consider options in

The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) released a Plan of Management for the Myall Lakes National Park which referred to boating regulations to favour non-motorised over motorised boating. Public reaction was strong and threatened to become severely polarised. On one extreme was a small but vocal group of power boating and skiing enthusiasts who wanted no restriction on their use of the Park. At the other extreme were some ardent wilderness advocates arguing

for the exclusion of all motorised boating, despite the fact that the lakes had seen three generations of power boating, as well as mineral sands mining and extensive forest logging operations.

There can be no doubt that the nature conservation values of the area would be best protected by a total ban on power boating, but only if such a ban could be effectively enforced. The risk of a community backlash against such a ban was considerable, threatening, not only the effective long-term management of the Myall Lakes, but also the goodwill and community support for many other conservation issues.

In this situation, the regional branch of the NSW Association for Environmental Education and the Hunter Wetlands Trust elected to adopt a more moderate position, seeking information on types and numbers of boats and their impact on the lakes. The NPWS was urged to gather such information to provide the data base prerequisite for devising effective management strategies which might include zoning sections of the Park and a combination of usage restrictions to protect nature conservation values.

The Myall Lakes boating controversy was temporarily defused by the community education initiatives taken over the summer of 1984-85 (Strike, 1985), but the issue remains unresolved, largely, I believe, because the NPWS has not followed the process identified at the time as necessary to settle the points at issue. The data base on boating usage and impacts remains inadequate and the communication channels opened with the various user groups and members of the general public have been allowed to lapse. The situation remains ripe to explode into controversy again but the process and means to resolve it are readily available. My fear is that an irrational and confrontationalist approach will prevail because of the inadequacy of the data base and the fact that the NPWS has failed to communicate to the user public the information which has been gathered.

The Hunter Wetlands Trust has had some success in local conservation issues such as the addition of 734 hectares of BHP land to the Kooragang Nature Reserve and the protection of the 14 hectare Newcastle Wetlands Reserve, previously earmarked as a garbage disposal site, by consistently adopting a moderate, but ecologically sound position. Community education initiatives have formed an important part of the strategies employed. These strategies have been outlined elsewhere (Gilligan, 1985, 1986), and I do not intend to discuss them at any length here. The chief points of relevance are the lessons we have learnt and the requirement we have identified for an understanding of the responsibilities and operational procedures of all levels of government.

Local Government

Local Government Councils act on reports and recommendations from Council officers. Sometimes it is necessary to target information, proposals and/or expressions of concern, at these local government staff members. In situations where Council staff are making recommendations to Council which are considered misleading or otherwise invalid, it becomes necessary to establish communication with the elected Council members to question the accuracy of the officers' advice and put alternative considerations. Such activity is usually referred to as lobbying or activism, but if done with integrity, I believe it can be regarded as valid

education and can produce positive environmental education outcomes far beyond the immediate target and the specific issue in question.

For example, the last five years or so have seen a dramatic turn around in public perception of the value of wetlands in many parts of the world; nowhere more so than in Newcastle (NSW) where the 10,000 odd hectares of wetlands within 50 kilometres of the city were seen as chiefly of value for disposal of wastes and reclamation for harbourside industry. Some 4,500 hectares are now on the Interim Register of the National Estate, approximately 3,000 hectares are in Nature Reserve, and reservation or protective management proposals are under discussion for other areas totalling more than 2,000 hectares. Recognition of the value of local wetlands has become a matter of local pride, offering an opportunity to significantly improve the image of the city previously noted chiefly for its heavy industry base and associated air quality problems.

State Government

At the State government level, we have had to face the problem of overlapping departmental responsibilities, a ready-made excuse for all the relevant departments to finish up doing nothing. This problem can be turned into an asset if a credible independent structure can be established to which all the relevant departments, as well as statutory authorities and corporate bodies can contribute. The Shortland Wetlands Centre is perhaps a useful example; a company limited by guarantee, registered with the NSW Corporate Affairs Commission, with membership and management controlled by the Hunter Wetlands Trust. The company was formed to establish a Wetlands Centre for Education, Research and Recreation. More than \$1 million dollars has now been raised in cash and kind, with contributions from all relevant sections and levels of government as well as large corporations, notably BHP, Westpac, Brambles and Tomago Aluminium. The general community, including service clubs, groups and individuals, has also been heavily involved. The Hunter Wetlands Trust now has a membership of just under 1800.

Federal Government

As demonstrated by issues such as the Franklin and Daintree, the role of the Federal government is difficult to pin down but with a sympathetic government and local member, ways and means can often be found to materially assist positive initiatives. In the case of the Shortland Wetlands Centre, Community Employment Program staffing as well as National Estate Grants and Steel Industries Assistance Program funds have been significant. Moral support often also comes from the Federal sphere in the form of National Estate listings and promotion of Australia's commitments under relevant international agreements.

The role of education

Groups or individuals within the Australian community, seeking reservation or protective management of valuable wetlands or other resources need to become aware of the political processes operating at all three levels of government which impinge on the issues at hand. As educators we must consider how we go about equipping people with the necessary skills to be able to take part in these political processes. For my own part I can recall little in my formal education that prepared me for any work in this

field. Any skills which I may have developed have been acquired by experience on a day-to-day, trial and error basis. Is this the best we can offer the citizens we expect to participate in our environmental planning and assessment processes? I think not!

To me, the key in the formal education sector, seems to lie in the management of the school environment. Therein lie many, often lost, opportunities for students to be involved in political processes that relate to real issues and have the potential to develop in them the awareness and skills needed to make a positive contribution to society's decision making processes.

At the informal or community level, two key factors stand out, opportunistic use of the broadcast and print media and presenting positive opportunities for involvement. We must remember that the 'politics' we are discussing is not the polarised, often cynical, 'party' variety, but by the broadest possible definition, the manner and processes by which individual and group perceptions interact in democratic decision making. Environmental education in this context involves information dissemination, values clarification and perspective taking with maximum involvement of the people involved.

For example, over the past several years I have been involved in walking trail design and construction with service clubs and community groups. While I have not attempted quantitative or 'objective' assessment, a very tangible increase in environmental sensitivity has been evident amongst the club members involved. The most appropriate role for the educator in this instance, is obviously on the pick or shovel with sleeves rolled up. Credibility in this situation is inversely proportional to the cleanliness of the hands!

We have all been hearing for years, about the sins of European civilization in the field of environmental degradation; too often lacking have been the appropriate opportunities for members of the general community to be actively involved in work to protect remnant natural areas, rehabilitate degraded areas, or otherwise feel that they are contributing towards righting some of the wrongs! The construction of educational walking trails and the multitude of similar tasks involved in projects like the establishment of the Shortland Wetlands Centre provide such opportunities.

Harking back to Figure 1, I am advocating that in most situations, it is not appropriate for the educator to be positioned on the far right of the graph, enunciating an ecologically righteous answer, admonishing those in the 'normal bulge' for being out of step! Furthermore, I am suggesting that the resolution which seems most ecologically appropriate on any specific issue will not necessarily be the best way to proceed in the broader perspective, or the longer term. Such is the complex nature of politics!

For the educator, credibility with the target group is paramount and this demands that educators operate much closer to the 'normal bulge' on the graph, if we are to succeed in permanently distorting the normal distribution to the right! (the 'ecological' right, that is!).

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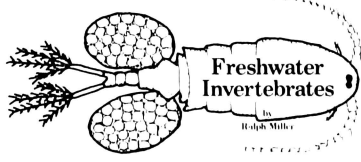
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