



Environmental Education and Cities Thematic Niche

Environmental Education and Urban Challenges

Climate change, air and water pollution, soil contamination, waste management – for each of these major challenges, often exacerbated in urban settings, environmental education focuses on developing responsible attitudes and behaviours. In reaction to climate change, it encourages us to think about our energy choices and our mobile lives; it enhances our awareness of our resources – air, water and waste – and their value and the importance of safeguarding their quality or getting as much as we can out of them.

Cities striving to develop their citizens' eco-awareness are those that decide to:

- enhance their regulatory approaches with educational programs;
- conduct campaigns on major environmental issues to encourage behavioural changes;
- support community-based organizations involved in educational initiatives to develop eco-citizenship;
- help local residents, businesses and institutions to take responsibility for their surroundings (neighbourhood, sector or borough).

Sub-themes

1. Reconciling nature and the city and protecting/restoring biodiversity

In most of the world's major cities, municipal initiatives take the form of activities and demonstration programs in large parks, nature parks, scientific institutions, etc..

Citizen actions translate into local initiatives to preserve or restore green spaces. Acting individually or together, residents, institutions, businesses and municipalities (or local authorities) can make the difference between a sterile environment and one that is alive and biologically diverse.



How can environmental education contribute to citizen actions aimed at reconciling the city and nature?



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2. **Appreciating/enhancing ethnocultural diversity**

As a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as important for humankind as biodiversity is for nature
(UNESCO – Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity)

Such cultural diversity is found mainly in densely populated communities, and can sometimes lead to tensions or the marginalization of certain minorities. Eco-citizen actions promote respect for the values associated with this ethnocultural, social or political diversity, and pave the way for initiatives to encourage values of openness and tolerance as “guarantees of social cohesion, the vitality of civil society and peace.”



How can environmental education contribute to citizen action to promote social and ethnocultural diversity that enriches the community?

3. **Recognizing the educational importance of our tangible and intangible heritage**

Heritage is any trace of a recent or distant past that has marked a place and given it historical or traditional significance.

We have to know where we have come from in order to better understand where we are going. Urban planning, or the lack of it, defines urban residents' basic environment. The nature of the built environment, the street layout, the abundance or absence of public squares, monuments and historic buildings all shape the urban fabric that in turn influences social behaviour.



How can environmental education contribute to better knowledge of the heritage assets in our urban environment and ensure that they are taken into account?

4. **Developing eco-citizenship reflexes in “the urban jungle”**

Authorities adopt legislation and by-laws.
They implement programs and services.

At the same time, educational actions emerge in the educational system and in the non-formal and informal networks of civil society. These actions are aimed at developing citizens' environmental awareness. Contributing to eco-citizenship means encouraging behaviour that will help everyone live together better, as we prepare for the serious shortages appearing on the horizon.



How can environmental education help city dwellers cope on a daily basis with the challenges in their immediate environment and around the globe?



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5. The role of local authorities in developing eco-citizenship

It is tempting to think of education and regulation as mutually exclusive, but this runs counter to the ideal of an integrated approach. Regulation sets out rules to be followed, while education explains why the rules exist.



How can local authorities harmonize their regulatory and educational approaches with a view to developing eco-citizenship?

Implementing services, building infrastructures and developing programs are wasted efforts unless the people for whom they are intended adopt and use them. Environmental awareness and education campaigns are inextricably linked.



What is the role of the educational dimension in environmental communications and marketing?

Local authorities are working more closely with local players all the time. Whether they are referred to as community organizations, associates, partners or players in civil society, they are all formally structured groups of people dedicated to promoting environmental awareness and environmentally friendly behaviour among their fellow citizens.



How can local authorities support community organizations working to promote eco-citizenship?

Eco-citizenship and eco-responsibility go hand in hand. Eco-citizenship education naturally leads people to assume responsibility for their surroundings, once they have been made aware and democratically organized. This can be seen at the neighbourhood, district, borough and municipal and other levels.



How can local authorities support community organizations in making decisions affecting the environment?

Conclusion

Given all these considerations, how do we encourage informed and active urban citizens? Can an educational approach contribute to these realities in the urban setting, to enrich eco-citizenship awareness and motivate all the players? Can urban environmental education contribute to making our cities increasingly human, sustainable and democratic?

Such questions are of interest to citizens, institutions and organizations within civil society and to political and economic decision makers, and tie in with the basic themes of the 2009 Congress.