

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION ONLY WORKS WHEN PEOPLE FEEL SECURE

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Environmental protection, perhaps the most urgent challenge in our time, requires advocates to go beyond providing information to influence people's emotions and sense of moral priorities. Unless effective actions are undertaken swiftly, fragile habitats and climate systems may soon be irreparably damaged, entailing widespread human suffering. But for many citizens struggling with daily concerns, environmental efforts can seem irrelevant or very abstract.

If people are worried about jobs or education or safety, they may show little support for policies to reduce greenhouse gasses, preserve forests, or save threatened species. Politicians, in turn, are attuned to their constituents' priorities, so they will not make difficult policy decisions to promote environmental wellbeing if they sense that most citizens don't care or see protective measures as a threat to immediate personal or family concerns.

How, then, can environmentalists encourage greater support for environmental protection? Research shows that providing information is not enough; we must build empathy for vulnerable wildlife and natural habitats. Meanwhile, though, people have concerns about others that they perceive as vulnerable, sometimes to threats posed by the very wildlife or habitats in need of protection. My research shows that we must address these concerns first.

Learning to Feel Empathy

Researchers studying human brains as well as social interactions have shown that emotions play an important role in moral judgments. Cold calculation alone cannot help people determine what is right or wrong or important to do. Anger and contempt can help people make such decisions, but empathy is equally central, because it allows us to feel what another person is feeling and thus inspires action to assist or protect others. Usually, we speak of empathy as fellow-feeling among humans, but people are also able to feel empathy for animals, plants, and nature.

Like all emotions, empathy is not purely instinctual. Just as each of us learns our native language or the norms that apply in social situations, we learn how to feel this emotion and about whom or what we should feel empathy in various situations. Research has identified various factors that contribute to the development of empathy:

- ***Familiarity and Similarity.*** The more experience we have with someone or something, the more likely we are to feel empathy, especially with those we perceive as being like us or helpful to us.
- ***Cues and Strength of Emotions.*** Certain things we see or hear can trigger empathy, and people who feel things very strongly are also more likely to empathize with others.

- **Early Learning and Past Personal Experiences.** Personal experiences can increase our appreciation and empathy for people, animals, or things – and what we learn as children from caregivers plays a large role.
- **Ideologies, Group Identities, and Bonding.** Shared values shape who (or what) people empathize with, and it is easiest for people to feel close to others in their own social group.

The Goals of Environmental Education

Empathy enhances feelings of care and concern for vulnerable others, because vulnerability is an emotionally powerful concept. When people see that innocents are threatened, they are likely to feel sympathy for the victims and direct moral outrage at the people or forces that pose the threat. In other words, to argue that an individual, group, or part of nature is vulnerable is to suggest the need for action to protect the threatened person, group, or habitat.

Environmental education, therefore, should do more than spread knowledge; it should also help people see animals, plants, and ecosystems as both morally valuable and vulnerable to threats. Taking into account the empathy-building factors reviewed above, educators can design programs to increase people's familiarity with natural spaces and the species that live in them. Getting people out into nature, especially as children, can enhance empathy for animals and natural surroundings. Because people most readily feel empathy for other humans, educators can also look for appropriate ways to bring out the human-like qualities of other animals.

What Happens When Vulnerabilities and Threats are in Conflict?

Sometimes, though, people have clashing perceptions about vulnerabilities and threats. Indeed, what seems vulnerable to one group can appear as a threat to others. When people perceive threats, capacity for empathy breaks down. If, for example, a hungry tiger is roving the village outskirts, residents will not care that the tiger is a member of an endangered species.

Closer to home, my research examined a controversy over the management of wetlands in New Jersey. Worried about accidents and air pollution from heavy truck traffic through their borough, many local residents called for a road through local wetlands. They also saw the wetlands as a threat, full of disease-carrying water and insects. Environmentalists, though, opposed the road; for them, the wetland was valuable and vulnerable, and commercial development was the threat.

Controversies like this are bound to happen, and environmentalists need to understand that feelings of empathy about humans, animals, or natural surroundings are difficult to arouse when the creatures or systems they hope to protect are seen as threats to safety or economic wellbeing. On some occasions, environmentalists may be able to counter such fears through education: in my New Jersey case study, for example, they could inform townspeople that the wetland actually reduced the local prevalence of certain diseases. Other anxieties, however, are not so easily reduced – especially those focusing on children's safety. Core concerns must be addressed before people will be able to care about lower priorities, including protection of ecosystems. In my case study, the first useful step might have been cooperation to redirect truck traffic or find other modes of transportation for industrial goods. With that worry gone, New Jersey townspeople would be free to understand the value of wetlands and the need to protect them.

Read more in Leah S. Horowitz, "[Toward Empathic Agonism: Conflicting Vulnerabilities in Urban Wetland Governance](#)." *Environment and Planning A* (2013).