

Environmental Ethics: A Comenius Project Proposal

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1) Theme

In environmental ethics we study the ethical relations between ourselves and our environment, learning how to think both ethically and critically and how to defend our ethical views with reasoned argument.

Environmental issues are often complex. Although in theory we can separate financial, political, and biological considerations, in practice these cannot always be pulled apart cleanly. It is easy to oversimplify problems, but when we come to propose and implement solutions we realise that there are many grey areas. This is where the practice of critical ethics comes in.

During the course of the project students will consider the extent of our responsibility for the world around us – for ourselves, our families, our schools, our communities, our countries, our fellow living things, and our planet. What do we owe to ourselves, each other, and the environment? We can picture this as an expanding circle of ethical responsibility, but how far does the circle extend? It's widely agreed that we have moral responsibilities towards animals, but do these responsibilities extend to *all* animals, including (say) insects? Do we have moral responsibilities to plants and bacteria? If not, what makes some living things deserving of respect and others not? What about the inanimate world? Should we respect rivers and mountains? Does the circle of our responsibility extend into future too? Most people accept they have a duty to their children and grandchildren, but what about distant future generations they will never know? How far into future does the circle of responsibility extend?

And what is the basis for these responsibilities? Is our duty to the environment only indirect, based on the fact we need a healthy environment for our sake, or should we respect the environment directly, for its own sake? Would it matter if scientists destroyed an uninhabited planet in order to test a new technology?

Students will also learn to think critically about themselves and their place in this world. For example, what is the balance between rights and obligations? Do we have a right to live in a healthy environment? If so, do we have an obligation to keep the environment healthy in return? Is every right matched by a duty in this way? Can we have duties to creatures or things they cannot reciprocate? Or is all responsibility based on reciprocity? Do we have duties to people we shall never meet, such as people in the third world or distant future generations?

If sacrifices are necessary to preserve the environment, who should make them? Should Westerners give up the benefits of technology and industrial development? Should people in the developing world be prepared to limit their economic development in order to prevent environmental damage? Who should decide? What if we have to choose between prosperity and the preserving the environment?

2) Outline plan

The project will run over two years.

Year One will consist of seminars focused on raising theoretical awareness:

- The animals issue
- Deep ecology
- Ecocitizenship
- Self-sufficiency
- The third world issue
- “Natural Evil”
- The burden of the current crisis

Year Two will involve organised projects aimed at developed practical awareness:

- Wildlife conversation
- Climate change
- Poverty
- Sustainable development
- GM foods and technological solutions
- Greenpeace and similar work

3) Aim and objectives

The basic aim of the project will be to develop critical awareness of environmental issues. Students will be introduced to issues, theories, and approaches, and will be helped to develop their own views and to suggest solutions to the specific problems they meet.

Students will be introduced to short theoretical texts (of a level appropriate to their age and ability) and will be encouraged to use a variety of sources to develop their understanding of, and response to, environmental issues including books, articles, the internet, discussions, field-trips, talks, and so on.

The students will develop their own views through notes and short essays, culminating in a formal presentation to their fellow students -- and, as appropriate, to wider audiences, including the school, parents, other schools (via Skype), and the general public (via a project website).

The project will be taught during ethics classes, although it is equally applicable for Discovering Our World (DOW) classes too.

4) Student outcomes

By the end of the project students should have

- gained awareness and understanding of the relationship between humans and their environment
- learned some of the basic theories, methods, and aspects of environmental ethics
- critically engaged with the views of some key environmental theorists and activists
- become familiar with some of the arguments used to support positions in environmental ethics
- begun to learn how to set out other people's views clearly and fairly and how to defend their own views with reasoned argument
- begun to apply general ethical principles to specific environmental problems and issues
- gained experience of presenting their own and others' views to fellow students in a formal way

5) Texts

Louis P. Pojman and Paul Pojman *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application*. Thomson Wadsworth: Belmont, CA, 2008 ISBN-13: 978-0-495-09503-3

Anthony Weston, *A Practical Companion to Ethics*, 3rd Edition. Oxford University Press: New York, 2006. ISBN: 0-19-518990-6

Nigel Warburton, *Philosophy The Basics*. Routledge.

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