

Towards Multi-cultural Environmental Participation

Inclusion of all members of a community is a basic principle in sustainable development. The vast missing contribution from ethnic communities is a significant loss to the environment. In many locations, ethnic minorities may make up a significant or major proportion of the local population. Yet often they remain absent within activities which shape the character of the local environment.

With the present momentum for Local Agenda 21, it is timely to think about stimulating multi-cultural participation. Here I would like to highlight two major areas:

1. The multi-cultural interpretation of the environment.
2. The creation of opportunities for environmental participation by ethnic communities as an integral part of the work programmes of environmental agencies.

The multi-cultural interpretation of landscape

A vital sense of belonging and ownership of the environment at large is a basic building block for the care of the environment. Much can be achieved through the multi-cultural interpretation of landscape.

Landscape, people and culture are constantly evolving quantities. They are also inter-related, especially in the small islands of the British Isles. Here, since centuries past, manipulation of the landscape has been essential to the livelihood of people. Waves of invasions and migration brought new people here. Trade brought about inter-continental exchange of elements of value, including plants. These served to provide sources of food, medicine, building materials and fuel, and as ornamentation. All this leads to the landscape being the result of the processes of nature as well as multi-cultural human activity. The landscape is therefore a multi-cultural landscape.

What is not commonly recognised and conveyed is that multi-cultural elements are part and parcel of the British landscape. There is a whole new field of work to be done with regard to the research and expression of the multi-cultural fact of Britain's landscape.

There is a growing consciousness that a shift in thinking needs to take place, away from a mono-culturally exclusive interpretation and management of British landscape, in order to make landscape interpretation relevant to the British contemporary multi-cultural society. There is a resistance against this trend.

With the present as a point in time, we can look at the interpretation and the manipulation of the landscape of Britain as expressive of the social and cultural values of Britain as a society. It is significant to note that the tendency is for the majority culture to dominate and interpret society as a mono-culture, and to reject the reality of its multi-cultural components. The dominant culture often expresses a strong need to believe in a mythical uniqueness that is discontinuous with everyone else. There is a resistance against identifying itself as a part of anything else. It feels threatened by the multi-cultural elements which are part of itself.

Within a world which is increasingly recognising that we need to work together and that we are interdependent and part of each other, such attitudes of division are counter-productive. We need to embrace the idea of being a multi-cultural Britain, of being part of Europe, and moving beyond that, part of one world.

In too many cases, the normal consequence of the historical recent arrivals of present day ethnic British citizens and their desired manipulations of the landscape are seen, not as part of the normal components of present day culture, but intrusions into a mythical unique and continuous culture that is deemed to be valuable in the context of a manipulated illusional non-changingness.

The clash and union of multiple visions and the relative power of the manipulators of landscape and cultural visions is in flux.

The outcome of the manipulation and interpretation of the elements of landscape, which should tell the story of the cultural and social associations of plants and landscape, can mean the facilitation or cutting off of a link to the fact of a multi-cultural historical British identity for generations to come. Its inclusive or exclusive nature will influence the outlook and relationship of our citizens to the world around them, and contribute to determining what direction the development of the environment will take and who will or will not participate in the shaping of the environment.

Opportunities

Many disadvantaged groups, including ethnic communities, have little or no access to information, resources and opportunities for participation. Energies and abilities lie dormant. Frustration and disempowerment then becomes the order of the day.

Within environmental agencies which pledge to be open to everyone, understanding and commitment at senior level regarding ethnic community environmental participation still needs to be built. They need to address:

1. The recognition of the energies and talents yet to be unlocked from ethnic communities.
2. The right to access to environmental participation by ethnic communities in terms of the enjoyment of the environment and opportunities to contribute to the preservation, protection and development of the environment.
3. The benefit to ethnic communities and the vast contribution to the environment by ethnic communities which go hand in hand with ethnic community environmental participation.

The following need to be integral to the work programme of environmental agencies:

1. Outreach to ethnic communities.
2. Training of staff so they can work with awareness and effectively with ethnic communities.
3. Multi-cultural interpretation of the environment.
4. Facilitation of access by ethnic communities to information, resources and opportunities for environmental participation.
5. Identification of the specific contribution particular cultural groups can make, and the forging of a new range of cultural-environmental projects.

Ethnic communities centre stage

Historically the Rio Summit highlighted the fact that we live on a small planet with a fragile natural system wavering under the overwhelming global impact of mass human actions. The equation is about people and the environment across the world. We can no longer hope to secure our future by turning inwards to seek simply local solutions to our local patch.

As a contemporary theme, local/global environmental action is crucial to the care of the planet Earth, our only home. Here, we can put ethnic communities centre stage. British ethnic communities are a continuation of the major cultures and peoples of the world. What better way to initiate multi-cultural environmental action than to begin at home. Let's take steps to enable everyone in our community to work as one to engage with environmental concerns locally and globally for a bright local and global future.

Written for 'New Ground' The Labour Party Environmental Campaign Magazine 1997