

Lessons from the Grim City: Rethinking Urban Environmental Education

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As urbanization continues to play a key role in shaping global environmental changes, one cannot but appreciate Chris Moffett's timely affirmation of the urban environmental education movement. Notably, Moffett offers a critical examination of how the binary thoughts of Socrates, Plato, Descartes, and Rousseau reflect the longstanding schism between the city and the ideal polis and between the city and nature. Beyond questioning such schizoid preconceptions of the urban environment, he further urges educators to explore meaningful interactions with the urban environment and rethink the educational processes.

Like Moffett, I support a more inclusive environmental education that does not condemn the city while romanticizing a non-existent pristine "nature." I also believe that urban environmental education is the key to redressing a lack of environmental justice in the age of capitalist globalization. However, I beg to differ with Moffett regarding his claim that the Western philosophical and educational tradition has everlastingly "cast the city as a fallen space, and the undesirable abode." My disagreement is based on the consideration that "the logo-centric tradition" in the West, as characterized by Derrida, has rendered a critical support to the worldwide pursuit of "progress" and "development" entailed in mega-urbanization. From this standpoint, the city does not appear to be forever grim in the Western philosophical landscape. Above all, modern schooling and urbanization seem to be interrelated and mutually supportive. Nevertheless, it is still common to regard "urban environmentalism" an oxymoron. Also, the emergence of urban environmental education seems to suggest the need to delineate a more specialized education program for urban dwellers. Thus, instead of undertaking an extensive review of philosophical texts that endorse and embrace the city as a manifestation of human civilization, I attempt to follow Moffett and examine the aims and methods of urban environmental education. Specifically, my examination will focus on unveiling the ambiguity surrounding the pivotal concept of "nature" in that movement.

As the forerunners of today's environmental education, Nature Study and Outdoor Education, echoed the "back-to-nature" movements elevating the aesthetic and spiritual significance of nature in a rapidly urbanized society. Their popularity reflected a belief that children's experiences with nature play a key role in shaping their lifelong development. However, as two-thirds of the global population has dwelled in cities since 1950,¹ it is not surprising that international organizations such as UNESCO have made efforts to claim that the objective of environmental education is to "foster a clear awareness of and concern about economic, social, political and ecological interdependence in urban and rural areas."²

The recent place-based environmental education movement further acknowledges the "plurality" of "places." By emphasizing the interconnections of school and

community, place-based environmental education can be implemented in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Echoing this movement, Moffett does not consider the city as “a hellish no-place.” Rather, the city is a living classroom for learning. Furthermore, in line with Jane Jacobs and the Situationist movement, Moffett’s vision of urban environmental education appears to embrace and encourage wide-range interactions with one’s urban habitat. Living in and learning from one’s urban habitat inadvertently converts the emblematic environmental activists’ plaint of Not in My Backyard (NIMBY) to Please in My Backyard (PIMBY).³ As Moffett does not support leaving the grim city for the Garden City or the Radiant City, he seems to advocate unconditional acceptance of one’s immediate urban surroundings. At the same time, by endorsing Guy Debord’s *Theory of the Dérive*, Moffett also recommends that urban environmental education must recognize and disrupt our habitual patterns in order to explore, initiate, and sustain more meaningful urban interactions.

Urban habitat as a pedagogical place does challenge the myth that environmental education is all about celebrating and preserving “nature.” In the meantime, urban environmental education, as envisioned by Moffett, seems to suggest that the urban habitat can be a place of possibilities. After all, the ever-increasing dwellers in large cities are the main consumers of resources and generators of waste. It is equally misguided to perpetuate an unsustainable urban economy as it is to attempt to preserve “nature” in its pristine condition. Hence, it is not necessary to delineate urban environmental education as a specialized education program in order to address and redress the anti-urban biases that seem to be embedded in traditional environmental education.

Advocating urban environmental education underscores the complex intersections between the perceived “natural world” and the “social world.” In light of seemingly irreversible globalization and rapid urbanization, especially in the developing nations, the “end of nature” recently announced seems inevitable: “By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature’s independence is its meaning; without it there is nothing but us.”⁴ In consequence, ecological problems are indeed the social problems of the inner world of society rather than the problem of the environment or surrounding world.⁵ It follows that presumably “natural” or “ecological” questions must center on “fabricated uncertainty within our civilization: risk, danger, side effects, insurability, individualization and globalization.”⁶ While such a sociological analysis of ecological problems acknowledges the inseparability of the “natural” and the “cultural,” it also reflects a current trend toward defining “nature” as “an artifact of language”⁷ or a project of “social construction.”⁸ This trend of thought presents an insightful critique of an essentialist and monolithic conception of “nature.” As human beings are capable of undertaking massive transformations of both “natural” and “cultural” environments, environmental education certainly cannot solely focus on constructing, disseminating, and transmitting objective scientific knowledge about flora, fauna, coal, water, metals, and forests, as suggested by the early proponents of Nature

Study. Instead, a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural aspects of today's urban problems is crucial to the re-orientation of our ecologically exploitative practices.

At the same time, there are problems with a radical constructivist conception of "nature" that reduces "nature" to varied discursive ideas or socially constructed artifacts. From the vantage point of radical constructivism, nature as "a singular and unified living material/physical world" does not exist.⁹ Instead, there are different genres of "nature" or "natures" as constructed by varied cultural institutions. Accordingly, one can consider the urban habitat as one of unlimited genres of "nature." But, such constructivist accounts of pluralistic "natures" can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the constructivist standpoint is helpful for exposing anti-urban biases. On the other hand, it offers neither epistemological bases nor ethical grounds to question or invalidate any discourses on "nature," despite potentially dreadful empirical consequences. Radical constructivism can "assimilate nature to an exclusive anthropocentric 'reality' and so should be seen as expressing long-term industrialist tendencies to separate the 'human' and the 'natural' realms and to assimilate the latter to the former."¹⁰

In view of the debates concerning the nature of "nature," an inclusive conception of environmental education must rectify the polarized conceptions of "nature": an anti-nature stand is not the key to unraveling anti-urban biases. Accordingly, environmental educators who embrace an essentialist conception of nature ought to raise their awareness of the changing nature of "nature" and the changing cultural contexts in which "nature" exists and changes occur. In other words, the "natural" realm does not necessarily preclude the occurrences of "changes," which include industrialization and urbanization. Therefore, instead of sustaining the polarization between essentialism and constructivism, environmental educators might want to take note of the interactive intersections of the "natural" realm and the "human" realm, which can be seen as the vicissitudes of both the "natural" order and the "cultural/social" order. The recognition of the interaction of the "natural" and the "cultural/social" calls for a more prudent collective inquiry into why, how, and what kind of "natural" and "cultural" knowledge should be constructed and disseminated across generational lines.

In conclusion, urban environmental education and mainstream environmental education share a common commitment to raising our awareness of our interconnections with our surrounding environments. Such ontological awareness does not dictate our leaving the grim city behind. Rather, it facilitates our recognition of environmental risk and of the limitless possibilities for environmental transformation.

1. Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London & New York: Verso, 2006).

2. UNESCO, *The International Workshop on Environmental Education: Belgrade, October 1973: Final Report* (Paris: UNESCO, 1977).

3. David Sobel, *Place-Based Education* (Great Barrington, Mass.: The Orion Society, 2004).

4. Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989), 58.
5. Ulrich Beck, "World Risk Society as Cosmopolitan Society? Ecological Questions in a Framework of Manufactured Uncertainties," *Theory, Culture & Society* 13, no. 4 (1996): 1–32.
6. Beck, "World Risk Society as Cosmopolitan Society?" 1.
7. William Chaloupka and R. McGreggor Cawley, "The Great Wild Hope: Nature, Environmentalism, and the Open Street," in *In the Nature of Things: Language, Politics, and the Environment*, eds. Jane Bennett and William Chaloupka (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 5.
8. Elizabeth A.R. Bird, "The Social Construction of Nature: Theoretical Approaches to the History of Environmental Problems," *Environmental Review* 11 (1987): 255–64.
9. Undoubtedly, constructivism is a complicated and contested concept. Because I do not have space to elaborate on divergent constructivist perspectives, my analysis therefore focuses on constructivists' argument against the independent existence of a physical "natural" realm.
10. David W. Kidner, "Fabricating Nature: A Critique of the Social Construction of Nature," *Environmental Ethics* 22, no. 4 (2000), 339.