

The River Tree: Youth, Leadership and Environmental Action

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Abstract

At the root of our environmental crisis is the inability of individuals to establish connection with the earth and each other. The environmental movement, which is said to stand for interdependence, has been unable to articulate how to make these connections in a way that will accommodate the diversity within the human community. Youth programs within the inner city that focus upon leadership are addressing this problem. Youth Action in East Harlem, New York City Outward Bound and the Toxic Avengers of *El Puente* in Brooklyn are giving young people the skills and confidence they need in order to make the connections with one another and the larger community. These programs have shown an ability to transform their urban environment through effective community action that also provides an effective education to young people. The use of experiential, problem based education has made the learning process both challenging and fun and gives an alternative model to traditional schooling.

The leadership and group training provided within these programs carry with them many similarities to ecological principles frequently cited in the environmental movement. Elements of group process such as communication and consensus provide a means with which environmentalists can make the connections that will create a sustainable society. By providing a model for how young people can relate to a larger whole, group process lays the foundation for connections with the larger whole of nature. In this way leadership and group dynamics can be considered a practical form of environmental education.

This type of education also serves to transform communities. The Island school in Roxbury, MA and Youth Force in New York City, both illustrate ways in which young people trained in leadership and team building skills are able to transform their community environment through creative action. The environmental movement must take the success of these programs into account while setting its agenda for the next decade. These programs also set standards for redefining environmental education in a way that will take advantage of the environment's potential for bringing individuals and communities together.