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Original paper

## ***Sustainability, nature, and education: a phenomenological exploration***

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### **Extended summary**

The purpose of this paper is to elucidate some differing interpretations of ideas of sustainable development and sustainability and to explore some of their educational implications. The approach taken is philosophical and in particular draws on a phenomenological perspective.

Over the past three decades sustainable development and sustainability have become central to policy responses to the growing recognition of environmental degradation that now confronts humankind. As such they have also become very influential in the orientation of environmental education, the idea of incorporating education for sustainable development into the curriculum lying at the heart of the United Nations centre-piece agreement *Agenda 21* in 1992. Their prominence was consolidated with the UN launch of the *Decade of Sustainable Development 2005-14*.

It is argued that the strong anthropocentrism that can be detected in dominant versions of sustainable development needs to be addressed and ultimately overcome because it expresses a deep-seated ‘metaphysics of mastery’ that is a prime contributor to our current environmental predicament. Here an overweening motive of seeking mastery has separated us from nature and has led both to the rise of scientism in which the objectivising of science becomes generalised into everyday life, and to the pervasive perception of nature as a resource in the service of the human will. While acknowledging that the application of science has led to many material benefits, the power of these motives, coupled with modern technology, is now such that they are in danger of occluding other important ways of relating to the world.

In response to this issue, and drawing on ideas of intentionality, an essential form of consciousness is identified whose ecstatic nature makes it inherently environmental and ineluc-

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tably bound up with sustainability in the sense that it is the place where things can appear as themselves, and hence it lets them *be*.

A phenomenology of nature is developed that reveals it as inherently mysterious and resonant with normativity and intrinsic value. It also reveals how things themselves in nature exist through their mutual participation in intimate emplaced interplays. In contrast with postmodernist accounts that incline us to see nature as a mutable social construction, here nature emerges as a quintessentially non-artefactual 'other' that is 'self-arising', possesses its own integrity, and that constitutes a primary reality for ecstatic consciousness.

These arguments raise some important pedagogical considerations. A central point is that the fundamental aim of environmental education must be to promote experience of, and understanding of, what is truly environing: the character of our emplacement. In this regard, it is argued that it is not scientific descriptions and theories that primordially hold us in our world – as scientism inclines us to believe. Rather, it is our felt encounters with the elemental such as the coming into presence of things in their native occurring, and the resonating of birth, death, growth, decay, movement and stillness, sound and silence, lightening and darkening, rightness and wrongness, and so forth. Primarily, our participation in such phenomena involves, not rational objectification and analysis in the service of effective autonomous agency, but non-rational receptivity and the capacity to be affected by the other, such that our agency is informed by an intimate situated knowledge of things themselves. This kind of participation is articulated in works of poetry rather than works of science. Only in this open receptive-responsive mode – a kind of 'loving allowance' – can we become properly aware of the truth of our environmental situation and appropriate sources of reference in assessing it and responding to it.

It is argued that global warming and pollution, massive deforestation, industrial fishing methods, and so forth, are properly evaluated not exclusively in terms of their impacts on our ability to satisfy current or future anthropocentric desires, but through a sense of their fittingness in the context of the powers, rhythms, integrity, normativity and intrinsic values of the otherness of nature in which human existence is embedded, and that is revealed by ecstatic consciousness.

In addition, if, as has been argued, sustainability, as a letting things *be*, lies at the heart of human consciousness, it articulates something that is central to the enterprise of nurturing authentic human being and hence it becomes a central consideration for education in general.

Granted these points, a key task of education becomes to find opportunities to reveal and disturb those taken for granted assumptions of the metaphysics of mastery as it continues to hold sway (often tacitly) in the life and language of educational institutions and beyond, and to create spaces for a whole-hearted, fully embodied, multi-sensory, receptive and reflective engagement with nature.

**Key words:** sustainability, nature, environmental education, education for sustainable development.

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