

ROYAL METEOROLOGICAL SOCIETY: AUSTRALIAN BRANCH MEETING

15 June 1976

Today is Monday: It is Raining

P. Pritchard

Mr Pritchard, Environmental Consultant with the Special Services Division of the Education Department of Victoria, asked 'Does meteorology have a place in environmental education?' He considered that environmental education is essential in building up attitudes for eventual specialisation and suggested that it should be supported by appropriate organisations for the purpose of producing recruits to the meteorological profession.

His group of ten people working in the schools forestry branch acts as adviser to schools on the preparation of plantations, provision of trees, and marketing and managing the development of softwood and hardwood plantations. However, it is felt that there is much emphasis on the use of plantations as a source of timber and income and that they are not used to their fullest potential as teaching laboratories. The group has become, he considers, forest managers and proprietors of 6000 acres and two million dollars of softwood plantation.

The trend in environmental education is away from formal grid plantations and towards the informal arboretum type of outdoor space. Environmental education is much more than field studies: it is a concept of a living environment that should be conveyed to the student as a study of values and a code of behaviour regarding environmental issues and his interdependence with other living things.

Mr Pritchard made some controversial points about the current state of environmental education in Australia and the world. He was sceptical about the system of developing teaching units around trendy issues such as pollution, uranium, aboriginals, etc., and thought that confusion results from this haphazard, individual approach to the subject. He saw some merit in the newer American conceptual programs, which are based on observation and experience of living things, starting from such questions as 'What's living in the class-room?' and other related activities to the child's conceptual range.

He put forward the proposal that environmental education should proceed throughout the whole education phase, beginning at crèches with the display of native animals, vegetation and, in some cases, ponds. At later stages it should refer to the total environment, both urban and rural. An education in environmental problems is vital to the long-term success of environmental legislation. Man is morally bound to preserve and conserve a quality of life for future generations. He pointed to a growing detachment of modern urban children from nature and animal life to such an extent that the Melbourne Zoo has introduced a nature corner where children can see and touch domestic farm animals. Ecology tends to integrate knowledge where other sciences tend to specialise and separate.

In conclusion, Mr Pritchard drew attention to the need of teachers for leadership within the Education Department. They need an environmental philosophy emanating (with coercion) from the Department in the form of a directive. They require training in teaching about the environment and assistance by the provision of syllabi which embody an environmental philosophy. The teacher is distracted by the large variety of institutions at different levels which are involved in the environment, for example, political pressure groups, conservation groups, government bodies, and private companies.

In the discussion which followed Mr O'Loughlin asked about the differing extents to which Federal and State Governments are involved in this field of education. The speaker explained that the Federal Government has a policy of giving initial grants to worthwhile projects (for example, the environmental studies centre at Bendigo) and the State Government is expected to provide the necessary support for continuation.

Mr Phillpot expressed concern at the heavy workload imposed on students nowadays and the possibility that environmental studies might be an extra burden. The speaker was reassuring and saw the future trend as towards decreasing the workload. Professor Morton raised the possibility of a thematic approach, i.e., inserting environmental topics into subjects such as English. He thought this might even be possible in mathematics.

Mr Bell asked what action meteorologists should take in supporting environmental education. The reply was that the initiative could come, for example, as an official approach from the Bureau of Meteorology to the Director-General of Education expressing interest and asking where meteorology could play a part.