

International Congress on Environmental Ethics and Education in Thailand: Environmental Education for Environmental Ethics.

Rajabhat Institute Phranakhon, Bangkok, Thailand.

16th-23rd August 2000.

A personal overview by Chris Storey.

The congress itself was held over the weekend of 19th and 20th August at the Rajabhat Institute Phranakhon in Bangkok. The congress was well attended with more than 200 people present including a Japanese contingent numbering over 40. The congress was the 3rd Congress of the International Association of Earth Environment and Global Citizen. The chief aim of the congress was to explore the possibility of a comprehensive environmental ethics and its embodiment in environmental education. To this end the participants exchanged information in the symposium and during discussion time and took part in workshops. A very important part was a demonstration of the use of the Internet in making environmental educational information available. The congress also included general research presentations and a student meeting. On the Friday before the congress proper we visited the UNESCO building in central Bangkok. An important but more relaxed part of the congress was the eco-tour to Khao Yai National Park. In addition our hosts very kindly showed us the delights of Ayuthaya, its Buddhist temple and pagoda ruins, as well as trips to mangrove forests, a floating market and the war cemetery and infamous bridge over the River Kwai at Kanchanaburi in the forested hills of the Myanmar border region.

The theme of the congress was set by the keynote speeches of Professor Fumiaki Taniguchi and Dr. Chamnien Vorratnchaiphan. Professor Taniguchi called for an integrated understanding of environmental ethics and education. He pointed out that our understanding of both environmental ethics and education tends to be ambiguous, and that in both cases we need to establish a sound theoretical framework and sound practical application. The aim is thus to integrate the theoretical framework and the practical application in both environmental ethics and education. Professor Taniguchi went on to describe how international cooperation in the development of materials for environmental ethics and education is vital towards this end. He drew attention to the work being carried out by professors involved in Konan University's environmental studies program to put together a CD-ROM. The hope is that Konan University, Peking University, Rajabhat Institute Phranakhon and Chulalongkorn University will develop this material together.

Dr. Chamnien delivered his speech on the Earth Charter. He explained that the 4 principles of sustainability: future generations, equity, partnership and carrying capacity, have often been ignored in government decision-making. We must bring ethics to the heart of development. Dr. Chamnien argued that the real meaning of ethics is a mode of living and not just a set of moral rules. To find this mode of living Dr. Chamnien appealed to Buddhist philosophy, particularly the concept of samadhi. Thus environmental ethics must be based on commitment from the heart. Dr. Chamnien set out a new paradigm for environmental

education in which the educator must be provider, supporter and empowerer. Importantly also Dr. Chamnien drew attention to the importance of equity, in terms of the growing gap between rich and poor; and partnership, in terms of the participation of everyone in decision making processes. In doing so Dr. Chamnien introduced ideas that I feel became central points of the whole congress: the realization that environmental issues cannot be regarded separately from social issues, and that democracy must be extended so that all people become active citizens in directly democratic societies. Environmental ethics and education must therefore work towards social justice and political and economic change as well as developing environmental awareness and ecological consciousness.

All congresses seem to generate their own particular themes and the themes mentioned above came up several times during the rest of the congress. The afternoon of the 19th was devoted to workshops and the student meeting. In the student meeting the Japanese side presented a report on their fieldwork activities at Konan University's Hirono Ground. They described their experiences in organic agriculture and creating a biotope. The Japanese students explained how external environmental problems are essentially linked with inner mind-environment problems giving the example of typical problems of the younger generations in Japan. The Thai side explained how they had been working with the poor people, especially children, from Bangkok's inner-city canal slums. The Thai side was very aware of social problems such as narcotics abuse, crime and the links between economic recession, the 'rat race' society and environmental problems.

The students on both sides, but particularly the Thai side - who were generally mature students, showed us that we cannot regard environmental problems in isolation from social, economic and political problems. This echoed Dr. Chamnien's words. We must recognize that environmental problems are essentially bound up with other social problems: mental environment problems, poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, violence and crime. In order to address all these problems we need to look closely at social, political and economic causes as well as developing ecological and community awareness and knowledge of and attitude of care towards the non-human world.

I think that holding the congress in Thailand really brought home the above insights. Thailand is a developing country and the gap between rich and poor is much wider than in Japan. Social problems such as narcotic abuse and violence linked with poverty, especially in the canal slums of Bangkok, are very obvious. As a consequence the Thai's were more aware of the links between environmental problems and social, economic and political problems. They were thus aware that all these problems must be addressed together. For me these insights underlined the true value of holding this congress in Thailand; a greater awareness of the links between environmental issues and social, economic and political issues that is perhaps generally lacking in Japan.

On Sunday 20th the research presentations often echoed these insights. In the environmental education presentations we had a good combination of papers that detailed the history of environmental education in Britain and Japan along with presentations that showed actual examples of environmental education being carried out in Japan and Thailand. A rich array of approaches were covered, such as the Magic Eyes Chao Phraya Barge Program in Thailand, environmental activities at a high school in Hamamatsu, Japan, environmental policy in Kamakura, Japan, and traditional cultural food in environmental education.

On Sunday afternoon the panel discussion focussed on the use of the Internet as a tool for sharing information and developing environmental educational materials. This was demonstrated by Professors

Kaoru Takasaka, Siriwat Soondaratok, Trisilpa Boonkhachorn and Takatoshi Watanabe. The success of the congress will be ensured if strong links and the Internet networking between Japan, China and Thailand can be fully realized.

Before and after the congress we went on a number of tours. Two days before the congress we visited Ayuthaya. The highlight was the eco-tour to Khao Yai National Park. Unfortunately, several of us, myself included, were unable to go to Khao Yai due to food poisoning. Our kind hosts compensated for us missing this tour by taking us to see mangrove forests southwest of Bangkok and to Kanchanaburi. It was very illuminating to travel in Thailand outside Bangkok. Bangkok is a vast, modern polluted city. It is typical of any such capital city in the Asian world. So to get a more authentic feel for Thailand it was important to get out of Bangkok. This was the first time I had been in the tropics and I was struck by how green the Thai countryside was. In the tropics the growing season basically lasts all-year, everything grows so quickly, and big, and the countryside is very lush. It was very interesting to see the mangrove forests. Mangrove grows where the salt waters of the sea and the fresh water of the land meet; and only in the tropics. We also saw areas where the mangroves had been destroyed for salt production and shrimp farming. Half of Thailand's mangrove forests have been thus destroyed.

For a northern European it was an exotic experience to see banana trees and coconut palms growing everywhere. From the point of view of environmental ethics it was interesting to note that in Thailand, like much of the developing world, food production is still very local. People, no doubt most often women, grow so much of their own food around their homes and communities, and along the rivers and roadsides. There are food markets everywhere selling fresh local produce. Of course modern intensive, industrial farming is increasing but it seems that poorer people in the countryside still grow much of their own food. This was an educational experience in its own right.

My last words must go to the people of Thailand. I had heard that the Thais are very friendly, open and smiling people. I have to say that in this case the stereotype is true. We were always met with smiling faces and much courtesy. Our hosts, and in particular Professors Laddawan Kanhasuwan, Siriwat Soondaratok and Chintana Soondaratok, were very helpful and kind to us. They went out of their way to look after those of us that contracted food poisoning and on the last day arranged a very interesting tour for us to compensate for missing the tour to Khao Yai. I am sure we all look forward to seeing them and their country again.