

When Children Explore their Environment

From 21st to 25th April 2008, the Environment Support Group team spent time with twenty young minds, helping them to explore, notice, discover, understand, listen, see and feel the myriad nuances of the environment enveloping their lives. To do so experiential learning techniques, which comprised of activities, field visits, film clippings, discussions and so on, were used.

The workshop was based on the themes of the four elements—water, land, fire (energy) and ether (spirit). Through these themes, the children were led to dwell deeper into the current condition of these facets and the relationship that human beings share with each of these.

Water: Understanding the Essential Element

On the first day, the theme was water. The children started with a news-paper exercise, identifying all coverage related to water. This helped them to understand a wide variety of issues, ranging from water supply to water pollution, neighborhood water bodies to the impacts of global warming on water. Following this a quiz was held to help them check their awareness levels on water related issues. Further, after the screening of a documentary film on 'water harvesting' the kids discussed ways in which they could contribute to save water. To foster their thoughts, at the end of the day, the kids were taken to the 'Puttenahalli' tank, where they could notice the impacts of encroachment and pollution on the water body. A treasure hunt was organised where children traced the paths of various products from its production to its disposal. This activity introduced them to the topic of waste management, dealt with in-depth in the following days.



Village Visit: Learning about crops, fields and cattle

On the second day, the children were taken to Madanapalli, a village in Andhra Pradesh. This visit was organized to help them develop a wider perspective on

people's relationship with natural resources and the environment, and also compare the contrasts and similarities between urban and rural areas. The trip to the village was filled with surprises and adventure right from the word 'go', starting with the bumpy bus ride. At the village, the kids were introduced to



village life, sustainable agriculture and the need to preserve local food grains, indigenous cow breeds and many other related issues. In addition to learning about the details of life on a farm, the kids also indulged in a lot of fun. They helped cook the afternoon meal which included onion chutney ground on a stone grindstone, sambhar, rasam and fresh buttermilk. The high point was when the kids jumped into the sump turning themselves silly wet. For some the overall experience was overwhelming and for others it was simply awing.

Land: Learning about indigenous resources

The third day started with a recap on the previous day's visit to the village. For many children this was the first ever exposure to a rural set up. Hence their minds were filled with questions and also the desire to know more. To give them a broader picture, the grappling situation in rural India due to lack of support to agriculture was discussed. The kids were shocked to know of the spate of farmer suicides in Vidharbha, a region in Maharashtra and the terrible conditions under which most farmers in this country operate. The fact that most farmers were being forced to shift from food crops to cash crops due to lack of market and government support and that this movement could threaten the country's food security also upset the children. In fact, this piece of information led to the next discussion which was about the need to use locally grown food and goods in order to promote farmers' interests. Another issue which came forth was the impacts of drinks like Coca Cola and Pepsi on not only its consumers but also the resources of the country, which are being drained and polluted simultaneously. The story of the people's struggle at Plachimada



which is trying to safeguard a local community's rights over its resources moved the

children greatly. For the second half of the day, the kids were taken to 'Foundation for Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions' (FRLHT), an organization that works on conserving and rejuvenating herbal medicines and other local practices. The guide at FRLHT introduced the kids to a variety of plants, their leaves, stems, roots and blades which were rich in medicinal values and could be used to solve common health ailments. The kids had an interesting time here chewing samples of leaves and grass blades, imitating cows they had seen in Madanapalli. The day ended with some sapling shopping at the FRLHT nursery, where most kids were inspired to buy one or more plants after hearing their significance.

Fire: What does it take for the lights to come on at home?

The theme on day four was Energy. The first activity of the day was a card game, which introduced the children to three forms of electricity production—hydel, thermal and solar. This game was aimed at demonstrating the multiple impacts of these different processes and also the effects it has on the resources of a country and its people. While playing



this game issues like displacement, pollution and loss of natural resources were also brought out. A detailed presentation which had slides on different methods of energy production helped the children understand this more graphically. Apart from this, the kids also played a molecule game, through which they were introduced to the concept of 'global warming'. In the afternoon, a visit was organised to the Renewable Energy Park near Raj Bhavan Road, to help children get a practical view of the alternative forms of energy production. Apart from watching a documentary film which elucidated this further, the kids also played in the park where they actually produced energy while going down the slide, riding a bicycle and walking in a massive roller which converted mechanical energy into electrical energy.

Ether: Developing the spirit of environmental awareness

On the last day of the workshop the kids were taken to Lal Bagh. Here, Mr. Vijay Raghavan Thiruvady took the children around the Bagh giving them information on various trees, their history, geographical and botanical lineage and so on. Thus, the kids learnt about the contributions of Hyder Ali and numerous and other botanists to the great bagh. This was an interesting walk, especially since most children who had come here before did not know these intricate facts about the trees they had watched many times over. The kids were also excited about the snake catching a fish in the lake inside the bagh, which they saw while leaning over the barricades on the lake.



Back in the office, to sum up all the themes the children made collages on various issues like waste management, water, global warming, farmers' situation, forms of energy, health and so on. The kids spent an educative hour reading on different issues while cutting, snipping and pasting articles. This activity was followed by screening of some short clips on various issues which had been discussed over the past few days. The clippings not only described these issues but also prompted children to think of solutions or contributions which they could make at their individual level. After a yummy lunch the kids and the ESG team members sat together to take a quick review and also get feedback on the workshop. For most kids this was a fun-filled and learning experience which was far more practical than what is practiced in their schools. On a parting note, the children promised to contribute in every single way that they possibly could. They also suggested that similar workshops be held in different schools and neighborhoods so that more children get exposure to these kinds of issues. Though everyone was sad about parting, they were all looking forward to spreading the message across and as one kid aptly put it, become the ESG (Environment Saving Generation)!

(If you are interested in organizing similar workshops for children in your neighbourhood or school, contact Bhargavi S. Rao, ESG at 080-26531339 or 080-22441977)