

# The Sustainable Millennium Project - What was it?

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The principle of the Sustainable Millennium Project was simple. 1992 marked a momentous milestone. It was the year of the founding of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). The first conference was also known as the Rio Earth Summit and its principal outcome was Agenda 21, a blueprint for a more sustainable new millennium. Not surprisingly, Agenda 21 became a talking point in environmental education circles, and it was not long before the thought dawned on me that the youngest children in the middle school I was then teaching at were the Agenda 21 children, the ones who would reach the age of adult majority during the first year of the new millennium.



So, I asked the question, what was an Agenda 21 child? What would be required of citizens who would live sustainably during the twenty-first century? In 1992 I was teaching geography in a middle school and working a day a week as a “teacher fellow” in a university. I had submitted my thesis on peer attachments and social deviancy and was preparing to start my PhD. The subject of geography had long been a home for education about and, for the practically minded such as me, *through* the environment. A radical new concept was dawning, education **for** the environment. Nascent in this concept was the need to change behaviour in order to conserve resources, maintain biodiversity and limit the destructive exploitation of pristine environments. Some two decades earlier, 1972 had seen the publication of a particularly influential book. *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al)<sup>1</sup>. A report commissioned by the Club of Rome, this drew attention to the proposition that unlimited and exponential growth of population and consumption was incompatible with the finite resources of a planet of finite size. Though it was later shown to be flawed on several counts, that simple but profound logic then appealed to me, as did the growing emphasis within environmental education on the concept of sustainability.

In those days, the destruction of rainforests and the perceived risks of nuclear power were popular topics amongst children but as an educator, I was acutely aware that the grasp of such topics, not only by children, was superficial and riddled with misconceptions. Probably the most pervasive and near-universal of these was that the climate was getting warmer because the Sun was shining through a hole in the ozone layer. I determined that if public understanding remained so shallow, the behaviour changes required to meet Agenda 21 would never happen. Moreover, whilst some children were fans of Michaela Strachan and David Bellamy, the majority exhibited varying degrees of indifference. Sustainability, I determined, would need the active commitment of most people, not a minority of nature lovers. It would require a turn away from high consumption living that could only work if higher levels of personal fulfilment were to be gained through less material wealth. A fresh start was needed to break the cycle of runaway materialism.

My answer came in the form of a Millennium Citizenship scheme, set up “in response to Agenda 21 of the Rio Earth Summit”. Its aim was stated to be “to provide education for sustainable development, “for school pupils and” (optimistically) “adults and the whole community”. I proclaimed Education for Sustainable Development to be “NOT about conserving wildlife or developing natural areas, although such activities might well be part of it as ecologically sound

living is an essential part of sustainable development.” It was primarily to be about “understanding the key concepts of the cycling of materials and the flow of energy in such a way that appropriate technologies are developed for the next millennium”. It was to include “social concerns and global justice”. It would be recognised “when the quality of human life improved without harming other life forms, compromising the needs of future generations or degrading the physical and human environment.”

This was noble rhetoric, but with the benefit of hindsight it is easy to see just how unrealistically optimistic it was. It ran into immediate difficulty over the question of values. To my credit, I could see that the requirement to find higher levels of personal fulfilment through less material wealth ran entirely counter to the dominant ideology of economic growth which had, in the words of William Morris, normalised “lives so empty and foolish that they force a great part of the workers to produce ware which no one needs”<sup>2</sup>. Not only was the ideology of consumption in fundamental conflict with the notion of greater personal fulfilment through less material wealth, 1992 was a time when educational reforms sought to champion “value-free” scientific knowledge and marginalise if not outlaw left leaning initiatives such as global futures education. Though a recognised National Curriculum cross-curricular theme, even Environmental Education suffered increasing marginalisation through its perceived emphasis upon pro-environmental value judgements when children should be presented, according to education secretary Charles Clarke, only with scientific facts

I could see then that my ideas had the potential to take the project away from materialism in a spiritual direction, but in an effort to remain within the mainstream I succeeded in getting the whole school to endorse a “millennium citizenship scheme” which issued pupils with a green log book. The book recorded credits in the four key themes of Ecology & Nature, Energy & Transport, Materials & Waste and Places & Spaces. Credits were given for:

- Knowledge and Understanding
- Reflection on feelings and attitudes
- Intentions to act
- Actions.

Membership of the scheme was optional for pupils, but many did opt in and the degree of commitment and inter-departmental cooperation across the school was a significant factor in the decision of the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) to bestow its curriculum management award.

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<sup>1</sup> Meadows D.H., Meadows, D.L., Randers J. and Behrens, W. (1972) *Limits to Growth: the Club of Rome Report*. Potamac Associates/Universe Books.

<sup>2</sup> Morris, W. (1885) *Useful Work Versus Useless Toil*. Essay Cited in Ashley, M. (1998) *Value as a Reason for Action in Environmental Education*, unpublised PhD thesis, UWE, Bristol, p6. Essay now available from William Morris internet archive. [William Morris - Useful Work versus Useless Toil](http://williammorrisarchive.org.uk/UsefulWorkversusUselessToil.html)