



**WWF** *for a living planet*

**WWF Scotland**

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## Parliamentary briefing

**May 2009**

### One Planet Future: learning to change the way we live

#### WHY IS CHANGE NEEDED?

We are now at a pivotal point in the Earth's history. WWF's Living Planet Report 2008 tells us that we are entering an ecological crisis, consuming the world's resources 30% faster than they can be replenished. If everyone in the world lived as we now do in Scotland, we would need three planets to survive<sup>1</sup>. Our over-consumption of resources is already making itself felt through rapid climate change, habitat destruction and pollution, which affect the health and wellbeing of people, habitats and wildlife around the world.

Technical solutions alone will not meet these challenges, we also need to change the way we live. A culture shift towards a sustainable 'one planet' future is required; something that will only happen if it is supported by education and learning. If schools education is to support this culture shift, government must;

- **Give schools the clear, unambiguous message that they are expected to take a whole school approach to sustainability**
- **Develop a strategic, national approach to training all teachers in participative decision-making and thinking skills**
- **Make it an entitlement that all learners receive regular out of classroom learning and first hand experiences of the natural environment and living things**

#### EDUCATION, LEARNING AND CHANGE

The Scottish Government has already made a commitment to a more sustainable future by making a Greener and Fairer Scotland key strategic objectives. The role that education must play in achieving this culture shift towards sustainability is widely recognised, particularly in the commitments set out in *Learning for Our Future*<sup>2</sup>.

But our education system is currently not playing its part in this cultural shift. The excellent work of a few committed individuals in addressing sustainable development education has bred complacency among decision-makers rather than stimulating sustained, strategic support to build on their achievements.

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1 Scotland's Global Footprint

2 Learning for Our Future, the Scottish Government's First Action Plan for the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005–2014



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Research by WWF<sup>3</sup> and Learning and Teaching Scotland<sup>4</sup> shows that sustainable development education continues to be delivered in a piecemeal, uncoordinated and often extracurricular way that grinds to a halt as learners hit the exam curriculum. As the *Curriculum for Excellence* is implemented, it is essential that our education system evolves and adapts to ensure that learners leave education equipped and able to be confident, successful, responsible and effective contributors to a thriving, sustainable Scotland.

A recent report by Cambridge University<sup>5</sup> highlights the detrimental effect on education of focusing on 'the basics' of literacy, numeracy and maths at the expense of the broader curriculum. This report also debunks the unfounded belief that focussing on 'basics' will raise standards in education; standards and breadth are interdependent and high performing schools achieve both. It is time that we finally laid to rest the persistent belief that sustainable development and other broader approaches to education are something that can only be done once the 'basics' and 'important stuff' has been done. Sustainable development education should be seen and valued for what it is; an important contribution to building a sustainable Scotland and essential to the delivery of an excellent, 21<sup>st</sup> century education.

WWF has worked in partnership with education leaders for over 25 years developing education that equips learners with the values, skills and knowledge that we need to live sustainably now and in the future. This tried and tested approach that has been shown to build learners' capacity for sustainable development while raising attainment, reducing disruptive behaviour and improving health and wellbeing.

In the research described above and our discussions with educators the same barriers to embedding sustainable development in schools education are regularly identified: the lack of priority given to sustainable development; lack of clarity on what sustainable development is and what they are expected to do about it; lack of training on sustainable development approaches and lack of time to implement changes.

The problem is not that we lack means of embedding sustainable development in the education system; it is the commitment to making it happen that is lacking.

## WHAT IS NEEDED

- **Give schools the clear, unambiguous message that they are expected to take a whole school approach to sustainability**

Despite commitments in both *Learning for Our Future* and the *Curriculum for Excellence* to embedding sustainable development in schools education, schools have still not received the clear, unambiguous message that they are expected to undertake a whole school approach to sustainable development - addressing it through the curriculum, through the way their buildings and grounds are run and through the leadership and culture of their school.. Nor is there any guidance and support to help them do this.

Since 2004 WWF has worked with schools to identify the elements of a 'whole school' approach to sustainable development.

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<sup>3</sup> One School at a Time – A Decade of Learning for Sustainability, WWF-UK, 2004

<sup>4</sup> A Time of Opportunity: The current status of Sustainable Development Education in Scottish schools, LTS 2007

<sup>5</sup> Cambridge Primary Review <http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/Publications/CambridgePrimaryReviewrep.html>

This resulted in the development of *Pathways*; a resource schools use to understand, plan and implement their own unique, locally-relevant whole school approach. *Pathways* has already been successfully piloted with 10 Scottish schools and has been adopted and developed by the *National College of School Leadership* in England. However as schools in Scotland have not been told that sustainable development is a priority and no nationally recognised framework exists, this work cannot progress any further. It is urgent that a nationally recognised framework is developed and that it is made clear to schools that they are expected to undertake a whole-school approach to sustainable development.

- **Develop a strategic, national approach to training teachers in participative decision making and thinking skills**

The *Curriculum for Excellence* identifies becoming a responsible citizen, developing the ability to apply critical thinking, solve problems and develop informed, ethical views of complex issues as purposes of the curriculum. These attributes are also essential for sustainable development.

Research by WWF<sup>6</sup> has shown that engagement with sustainability issues and participation in critical, systems and reflective thinking and meaningful decision-making around them are effective ways of cultivating responsibility, ethical values and problem solving skills. Sustainable development education creates a virtuous circle in which building capacity for sustainable development also delivers the purposes of the curriculum. However, outside of the NGO sector there is little guidance and support for teachers wishing to undertake this type of 'values education' and it is not a central component of either Initial Teacher Education or Continuing Professional Development.

Some training in these essential skills already exists but the skills are not being mainstreamed in education. If the ambitions of a *Curriculum for Excellence* are to be realised and learners are to be properly prepared to be effective contributors to a more sustainable Scotland, it is essential that teaching participative decision-making and critical, systems and reflective thinking skills are incorporated into both Initial Teacher Education and Continuing Professional Development for qualified teachers.

- **Make it an entitlement that all learners to receive regular out of classroom learning and first hand experiences of the natural environment and living things**

If we are to realise that ambition of creating a Greener Scotland it is clear that individual behaviour will need to change. Research by WWF-UK<sup>7</sup> into what motivates people to change their behaviour shows that an individual's values (what they believe to be important) are far more important than knowledge (what they are told is important) in motivating behaviour. This research also indicates that first-hand experiences of the natural environment and living things are an important element of cultivating pro-environmental values.

At a time of deepening environmental crisis, when the need to move to a sustainable Scotland has never been stronger, our young people are having less and less contact with the natural world<sup>8</sup>.

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6 One School at a Time – A Decade of Learning for Sustainability and Linking Thinking systems thinking resource

7 Weathercocks and Signposts, WWF-UK April 2008

<sup>8</sup> *Outdoor Education in Scotland: A Summary of Recent Research*; Scottish Natural Heritage and Learning & Teaching Scotland 2007

As a result, their chances of developing pro-environmental values are reduced. Also, by missing out on out-of-classroom education, learners are missing out on a host of other benefits it can provide such as improved concentration, greater enthusiasm for learning, better health and wellbeing, reduction in disruptive behaviour and stronger social skills.

At present out-of-classroom learning is generally confined to once a year school trips and there is a presumption that learning will take place in the classroom. It is essential that we challenge this presumption so that the school's grounds, surroundings and local community are regularly used as teaching environments, giving learners regular contact with the natural world. Effective initiatives such as Grounds for Learning and Forest Schools, that encourage weekly and, in some cases, daily out-of-classroom learning experiences, already exist but they are the exception not the rule. If we are to move towards a sustainable Scotland it is essential that regular out-of-classroom learning and first hand experiences of the natural environment and living things are made an entitlement for all learners.

#### WHY NOW?

Delivering the *Curriculum for Excellence* in schools will require time to develop new approaches and resources and also support and training for teachers. The delivery of the *Curriculum for Excellence* and the embedding of sustainable development in schools education is not an either/or situation; the former depends on the latter. Sustainable development education provides the approaches needed to cultivate confident, successful, responsible and effective contributors. It is also essential to building a sustainable Scotland.

The time to act is now. At this time of change in Scottish education, sustainable development education must be 'built in' to the delivery Curriculum for Excellence. If we miss this opportunity and need to embed sustainable development retrospectively, it is likely to incur costs that go beyond just the financial.

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