

Children Taking the Lead in Environmental Protection for Peace

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ABSTRACT

As the world is facing degradation of the ecosystem and suffering from the effects of climate change, it is time humankind wake up to the realities of imminent disaster. While people seem to race towards crass materialism unmindful of the destruction of the environment, it is time that children take the lead to negotiate the challenges of ecological degradation. Children are the worst sufferers of environmental degradation and as future leaders they can play a pivotal role in sensitizing adults on the need to adopt sustainable lifestyle and thereby contributing to sustainable peace. This chapter through perspectives of children from different countries will aim to underscore their concerns and the solution they are looking at.

Keywords: Environmental degradation, sustainable peace, child-led environmental campaigns

Senior Broadcaster Sir David Attenborough in the recent World Economic Forum meeting in Davos warned that humankind has the power to exterminate whole ecosystems “without even noticing”, and urged world leaders to treat the natural world with respect.

During an interview, he said, “We’re now so numerous, so powerful, so all-pervasive, the mechanisms we have for destruction are so wholesale and so frightening, that we can actually exterminate whole ecosystems without even noticing it. We have to now be really aware of the dangers of what we’re doing, and we already know that of course the plastic problem in the seas is wreaking appalling damage upon marine life, the extent of which we don’t yet fully know.”

(<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jan/22/david-attenborough-and-prince-william-take-world-leaders-to-task-on-environment>)

The concern raised by Sir David Attenborough

had been accentuated by eminent primatologist, Jane Goodall who expressing her anguish on the scenario had said, “*We must remember that we have not inherited this planet from our parents, we have borrowed it from our children. But we have not been borrowing their future, we have stolen it and we keep stealing it.*”

Children are the worst sufferers of environmental degradation and climate change. Lake (2015) said, “There may be no greater, growing threat facing the world’s children – and their children – than climate change. This mounting global crisis has the potential to undermine many of the gains we have made in child survival and development – and poses even greater dangers ahead.”

Lake further notes, “In every crisis, children are the most vulnerable. Climate change is no exception. As escalating droughts and flooding degrade food production, children will bear the greatest burden of hunger and malnutrition. As temperatures

increase, together with water scarcity and air pollution, children will feel the deadliest impact of water-borne diseases and dangerous respiratory conditions. As more extreme weather events expand the number of emergencies and humanitarian crises, children will pay the highest price. As the world experiences a steady rise in climate-driven migration, children's lives and futures will be the most disrupted."

In the backdrop of the concerns raised by Goodall and Lake, it would be pertinent to understand the perspectives of children from across the world on what they think they can take the lead in contributing to ecological conservation and challenge the effects of climate change.

Ta'Kaiya Blaney, a 14-year old environmental activist has aptly described the inherent link between nature, human and all living beings and how this constitutes true peace. "We must be unified with one heart and one soul and one vision. We understand we want true peace. True peace is respect for our natural resource, respect for all of our human and non-human communities, a comprehensive understanding of our place in the world as caretakers and stewards. That's what we want and need for our survival if we are to survive on this planet that we are destroying." (The Peace Gong, February 2018)

Child-led activism for climate change and environment has seen a global surge with children like Greta Thunberg, a 16-year-old Swede, who drew worldwide attention and inspired many young protesters across Europe. She has called for school strikes to raise awareness of global warming and scolded world political and economic leaders.

Greta in her Facebook post expressing anguish at the seriousness of the situation says, "When I say that I want you to panic I mean that we need to treat the crisis as a crisis. When your house is on fire you don't sit down and talk about how nice you can rebuild it once you put out the fire. If your house is on fire you run outside and make sure that everyone is out while you call the fire department. That requires some level of panic."

(https://www.facebook.com/gretathunbergsweden/posts/767646880269801?__tn__=K-R)

She underscores, "There is one other argument that I can't do anything about. And that is the fact that I'm 'just a child and we shouldn't be listening to children'. But that is easily fixed - just start to listen to the rock solid science instead. Because if everyone listened to the scientists and the facts that I constantly refer to - then no one would have to listen to me or any of the other hundreds of thousands of school children on strike for the climate across the world. Then we could all go back to school. I am just a messenger, and yet I get all this hate. I am not saying anything new; I am just saying what scientists have repeatedly said for decades. And I agree with you, I'm too young to do this. We children shouldn't have to do this. But since almost no one is doing anything, and our very future is at risk, we feel like we have to continue."

Children like Greta Thunberg, Ta'Kaiya Blaney and others in different parts of the world are taking the lead in the movement to save the planet Earth and thereby contributing to sustainable peace. This chapter by capturing the perspectives of children would try to highlight the vision of future leaders. The perspectives of children emerged from interviews of child reporters involved with The Peace Gong team and also references to articles to written by children for the children's newspaper in different points of time.

Children take the leadership to conserve the environment and contribute to peace

A teenager of Mill Valley, Hart Fogel, has been involved in various community service projects since middle school, and started a garden project in 2012. He notes "Young people of the world, we are poised to make an unprecedented change. Really, we are on the precipice of transforming global society to make it more just and equitable. But if we want to do this we have to collaborate. That means that we have to transcend concepts which typically divide us like national borders, race, socio-economic status, religion and sexual orientation. We need to see ourselves, not as isolated

individuals acting independently in our respective communities, but rather as citizens of the world who are working towards a common goal.” (The Peace Gong, February 2018)

Fogel’s contention on the need for young people across the world to come together to contribute towards sustainable peace is reiterated by two young girls from Germany, Angelina and Rosalie. In an interview to The Peace Gong (February , 2018), they point out, “Through this generation, we have the opportunity to change something and to spread our message. We unite our forces and help each other to build a One World Family. Together we, the children and the youth can achieve enormous things and we can bring the world back into balance.”

Jiya Khan, 15, and Editor of The Peace Gong’s children newspaper underscores children and young people are the stewards of Mother Earth and they are duty bound to protect it by all means’. She poses a pertinent question when she asks, “When we human beings argue for people’s rights over natural resources -- not just for commercial or industrial use, but even as “our” forests, rivers, land and oceans -- are we not forgetting that these are also the natural home of so many other forms of life? As the “cleverest’ species, are we human beings not duty-bound to be the guardians and stewards of the natural world?”

Jiya, who hails from New Delhi, further points out, “When we displace other living things for our own benefit or profit, are we not guilty of violence against their rights to peaceful existence? When we cut down a forest, is that not war? When we lay out a railway track across an elephant crossing, or let chemicals flow into a river, or stop growing millet and start growing tobacco, is that not a threat to some other creature’s right to food? Guardians and stewards are not owners: they are trustees! Trustees are duty-bound to uphold and defend the peaceful existence and security of all who are in their trustee-ship territory. Our trustee-ship territory is our planet Earth!”

She wonders if people are good trustees of planet Earth and whether they understood their roles and responsibilities. She feels only as good trustees of

Earth, young people will be able to contribute to lasting peace in their communities.

Meanwhile, members of Children Field School of Gokak Shishu Panchayat, Karnataka, India talk about the leadership training they get in ecological conservation. They share one of the basic thrust of the training, “The modern man must re-establish the broken link with the nature and with life. He must again learn to invoke the energy to grow things and recognize it as was done in ancient India. Centuries ago, one would take from the earth and atmosphere only as much as one could put back.”

The children involved in the Gokak Shishu Panchayat are taught on sustainable lifestyle and sustainable consumption patterns. They point out, “Unless we adopt sustainable practices we cannot make a difference in the large scale environmental hazards that we face in our daily lives. A minimalist lifestyle should be the goal and we children can take the lead in sensitizing adults in this significant issue.”

The members of Gokak Shishu Panchayat point out, “We strongly believe that all children and young people need to be sensitized on sustainable living practices whether they are living in villages or in cities so that they can come together to contribute towards conservation of Mother Earth. Every minute is important in our efforts to protect Mother Earth. The rate at which we are destroying her is unprecedented. It is only when we young people across the world come together and contribute at a rate greater than people destroying it, will we be able to save her.” (www.thepeacegong.org)

According to Wassam Sheikh, 14 of Karachi, Pakistan, “Children and youth can combat the challenges of environmental degradation by taking small initiatives like plantation, awareness of eating healthy and avoiding junk, start conserving water, turn off lights, TVs, computers, when you do not need them. Recycle everything you can. If your city does not pick up recycled materials, find out who you can talk to about starting this service. You should be recycling paper, aluminum cans, cardboard, food cans, plastic, glass, newspapers, magazines, junk mail, phone books, and anything else made of paper.”

Wassam and other students involved with The Peace Gong Pakistan point out, "Every society has its protectors of status quo and its fraternities of the indifferent who are notorious for sleeping through revolutions. Today, our very survival depends on our ability to stay awake, to adjust to new ideas, to remain vigilant and to face the challenge of change for its high time. And fortunately, the good news is, we have everything we need now to respond to the challenge of global warming. We have all the technologies we need, and everything that can help us make our climate better and we must not wait for the change to happen but rather be the change we want to see in the world."

Aisha Shuaibu, 18 and a child reporter of The Peace Gong from Jos, Nigeria talk about how children in her community are affected by the problems of environmental degradation. "Climate change and environmental degradation do affect us physically, psychologically and even academically. Flooding has been the major problem in our community. It destroys our houses and farms every year. Many lives were lost as a result of flooding. A lot of us have not been attending school. There are others who have to stop going to the school because the money we got from our farm products is not sufficient enough to pay our school fees; this is the result of our crops being destroyed by flooding that occurs each year. "

She argues, "Children and young people need to be educated on how to reduce pressure on natural ecosystem. We should promote children and youth participation in maintenance of ecological structure and biodiversity conservation in a big way. Sustainable education should be made compulsory and a national initiative on sustainability management needs to be done. The Peace Gong Nigeria hopes to bring together children and young people to create awareness on the concerns of climate change and work on ecological conservation. When we work for biodiversity conservation, we will be contributing towards a culture of peace."

R.A. Kaumadi Sachinta Rajapaksha, 17 from Saranath College, Sri Lanka shares his thoughts on how young people can take the lead in conserving the environment. He says, "I have promised myself that I will carry on with the celebration of planting tree in my birthday for the rest of my life as I have been reaping the results from the plants I grew since my childhood. The feeling of witnessing how a plant grows slowly which you have planted can't be explained. So, we children as the future of the country can give a real meaning and be an example to the world by planting trees and protecting them for our brothers and sisters." (The Peace Gong, November 2018)

"So when each child like us start thinking of the environment intricately and contribute to its sustainability, there will be multiplier effect and will be able to influence adults from preventing them to protect Mother Earth," Rajapaksha says.

CONCLUSION

The perspectives of young people captured in this chapter highlight their concern at the degradation of the environment which is accelerating at a rapid pace. Children are one of the worst sufferers of climate change and related environmental crisis. School strikes on the issue initiated by children like Greta Thunberg showcases how children across the world can take up action to protest against the seriousness of the situation. The efforts of children involved in Children Field School of Gokak Shishu Panchayat on sustainable lifestyle and sustainable consumption can be a guiding path for child-led sustainable action. All these efforts can be replicated and children can be encouraged to take the leadership to become 'good trustees' of Mother Earth.

REFERENCES

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