

NOTES, NEWS & COMMENTS

The First International Children's Festival for 'Peace With Nature'

'When one learns to observe Nature, one realizes very soon that one cannot do otherwise than love her... All during our work, we have understood that nothing is ever too small. Nobody here is too small and even the smallest of our ideas, if it comes from the heart, is already big enough to be shared... Even if it doesn't seem to be particularly good, it can provoke other ideas in the head and heart of all who listen to us. Nature herself doesn't despise what is small. Before becoming a big and strong tree, the grain is hidden in the earth. Therefore all our ideas to protect and preserve life on our planet are worth listening to...' (Pupil of the Ecole des Palettes, Grand-Lancy, Genève).

A very special event, of interest to everybody concerned with education and the environment, was held in Assisi, Italy, during 18–21 March 1988, to mark the end of the European Year of the Environment and the beginning of Spring: an International Children's Festival, which offered an International Forum to children of different cultural and bio-regional realities, in which to express their views. The era of the new ecological-universal culture has been enriched by making children part of it, and they have brought in a new enthusiasm and a fresh outlook.

Background of the Event

The *Assisi Nature Council*, an international organization which considers environmental education—future-oriented and ethically motivated—as the centre of its statutory purposes, under the patronage of the Task Force of the European Year of the Environment of the EEC and of the Commission on Education of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), invited children from 10 to 14 years of age, from all parts of the world, to send their projects to Assisi, Italy. These projects could be expressed in any of a variety of media, but should reflect the child's hopes, fears, and dreams, regarding the future of the relationship between Man and Nature, while suggesting their own solutions to the problems arising therefrom (Fig. 1).

In the end some 300 children from among the authors of such projects were invited to Assisi, accompanied by adults, to participate in 4 days of what was to prove a unique and wholly international, common experience. Adults were invited to share in the message that children deliver to the world—make Peace with Nature—through a series of workshops and meetings and exhibitions of children's work and art in a special Children's Visual Environmental Fair, while the evenings were full of dances, films, and theatrical performances—all created by the children themselves (Fig. 2). The adults' role was to initiate the cognitive process in the child, by means of the indoor and outdoor workshops, and to stimulate the children's awareness and responses, by asking questions about their ideas, and offering solutions to the problems of the future of Nature and their personal part in overcoming them.

Trees Planted for Children's Peace Grove

The last day was that of the Spring Equinox, and was chosen for the planting of 400 indigenous trees—the nucleus of the first International Children's Peace Grove dedicated to St Francis of Assisi—as witness of their desire to 'make Peace with Nature'. The chosen place was Mount Subasio, a small mountain above Assisi in Italy—a Mediterranean country with a long history of exploitation of natural resources, which is part of the allegedly 'oldest humanized landscape in the world' (Fig. 3).



FIG. 1. The Author (holding microphone) and RAI (Italian Television) interviewing some of the children in the grounds of the Basilica of St Francis, Assisi. Photo: Donald J. Cohen.

The choice of place was made *even more* significant by the fact that Assisi is the birthplace of Francis of Assisi and the mountain is the place where, according to legend, he talked to the birds. Francis of Assisi is acclaimed as the patron of ecologists for his poetic vision of an unfortunately overlooked religious view, that celebrates the interconnection of all living creatures and non-living matter.

Ideals Behind the Festival

We are facing an important phase in the evolution of the concept of education, namely of stressing the necessity of children's greater involvement and sense of responsibility. Moreover, environmental education is a *sine qua non* for achieving a better future *inter alia* by creating or reinforcing especially in children those attitudes and values that can help in the fight against the destructive forces of Mankind. So the two should, surely, go forward hand-in-hand.

Children have to be given every opportunity to be in contact with the natural world, and to express their feelings and ideas about it quite freely—especially as regards that future which will soon be theirs. 'Children can be seen as transmitters as well as receivers of culture. Adults can be seen learning from and with them... There is clearly a difference between saying that there *ought to be* participation by children and youth... and *actually facilitating an environment where this is possible...*' (Simon Nicholson, *Edu-*



FIG. 2. Nature-inspired Zulu dances at the Theatre of La Cittadella for the opening ceremony of the Children's Festival at Assisi. Photo: Donald J. Cohen.



FIG. 3. A crowd of the children of the Festival walking towards Mount Subasio near Assisi to plant the International Children's Peace Grove of Indigenous Trees. Photo: Donald J. Cohen.

cational and Psychological Interactions, Department of Education and Psychological Research, Malmö School of Education, University of Lund, Sweden, 1982).

These ideals of the Festival reached a wider audience than we had hoped for: requests for participation arrived at our Headquarters (in Assisi and in Lausanne) in unexpected quantity, and with a speed that at some points threatened to overwhelm our organizational capacities. The need was in the air: from then on, environmental education could never be the same for us again.

Encouraging Outcome

When children, from all corners of the world, gathered together in the 'Cittadella' (the complex that hosted the Festival), and in the open fields and in the woods of Mount Subasio, a direct, simple, spontaneous relationship developed between them. This was not just an added bonus to the Festival's already crammed agenda, but rather the discovery of the 'true' meaning of the Festival, that unfolded as a revelation and charged the atmosphere of the event with a wonderful harmony. It was the brotherhood and sisterhood of the children of the world in the name of their love for Nature, the realization that they now belonged to a world-wide movement—I hesitate to call it elite—and that the Festival was only the beginning of something that will go on and on, replicating itself through other festivals elsewhere, and through other projects, better awareness, and more knowledge.

We are now in possession of a great number of interesting projects, posters, letters, videos, poems, films, etc., by children, that constitute the beginning of a set of archives of children's expressive work on, and visions of, the future of The Environment. Furthermore, there are plans afoot to hold future festivals in other parts of the world, in accordance with the desires expressed by children and adults alike. Thus the Future has begun to be moulded by the hands of children in whom we can place our hopes.

MARIA LOUISA COHEN, *President*
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International Cooperation on World Conservation Information Centre: Joint Announcement by UNEP, IUCN, and WWF

The International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature), recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding pledging their support to the IUCN Conservation Monitoring Centre. Signing on behalf of the three organizations were Dr Martin W. Holdgate, IUCN's Director-General, Dr Mostafa K. Tolba, UNEP's Executive Director, and Mr Charles de Haes, WWF's Director-General. Each of the three partners has pledged £200,000 a year towards establishing the Centre as a focal point for documentation and distribution of information on the state of the planet's threatened species, habitats, and living resources.

To be renamed the World Conservation Monitoring Centre (WCMC), the Centre will aim for a global overview of conservation data while at the same time making data available for those carrying out conservation and natural resources assessments at regional and national levels. WCMC will also develop a network of national databases as a means of supporting conservation action at the local level in the less-developed countries. 'It will no longer be good enough for officials to make bad decisions and claim they didn't have enough information,' said Dr Robin Pellew, Director of WCMC.

Currently Based on Cambridge & Kew but with Global Coverage

Based at the University of Cambridge and the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, England, WCMC will build up comprehensive files on the 500 sites in the world that are

best-known for their biological riches. It will also keep records of the thousands of threatened species of plants and animals around the world, of a global network of over 12,000 national parks and protected areas, of the state of the Earth's wildlife habitats of particular conservation concern (such as tropical forests, wetlands, and coral reefs), and of the trade in wild plants and animals and their products throughout the world.

WCMC's database will also link into other existing international conservation information systems, including those held by its three founders (*see above*), plus the World Bank, UNESCO, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, the US Nature Conservancy, Conservation International, the International Council for Bird Preservation, the World Resources Institute, and the International Council of Scientific Unions, altogether making it probably the largest conservation database in the world.

Inheritance of IUCN Conservation Monitoring Centre

To start with, WCMC will inherit the information gathered by IUCN over the last decade and held by the existing Conservation Monitoring Centre. This information includes the Red Data Books which list threatened species world-wide, the Directories of Protected Areas, and the data used to produce the United Nations' List of National Parks and to monitor countries' adherence to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

All three organizations welcomed the cooperation: 'The modernization and expansion of WCMC will help the three