

Education for Eco-justice at The Edmund Rice Centre

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Introduction

The Edmund Rice Centre (ER Centre) is an educational institution involved in research, advocacy, networking, engaging with schools and the community sector, offering cross-cultural immersion programmes and conducting in-service trainings. Amongst the Centre's objectives are:

- **Conduct and encourage research into the causes of poverty and inequity in society, with particular regard to youth and Indigenous Australians.**
- **Promote teaching and experiential learning activities that support awareness, understanding and action in the areas of justice and community issues.**
- **Facilitate liaison and networking opportunities amongst agencies involved in social justice and community education activities.**



¹⁸ Earth Charter Centre for Education for Sustainable Development at UPEACE, Costa Rica

¹⁹ Edmund Rice Centre, Australia

In 2005, the ER Centre began a project to examine how they could better integrate ecological concerns into their work, and as a result started the Eco-Justice project. This project included examining the ER Centre's ecological practices, developing a number of resources on issues of sustainability, and creating the "Pacific Calling Campaign and Partnership," an association of individuals and organizations concerned about Australia's Pacific neighbours, dedicated to helping address the issues arising from climate change in low-lying Pacific nations.

The philosophy of the Eco-Justice project comes directly from the principles of the Earth Charter and the ER Centre aims to integrate these principles throughout their social justice education, research and advocacy programmes. The Pacific Calling Campaign and Partnership is an example of a programme into which the Earth Charter principles have been integrated.

Pacific Calling Campaign and Partnership – changing our neighbour's futures

In May 2006, members of the ER Centre began a campaign in solidarity with people in Kiribati and Torres Strait islands, to highlight the implications of climate change for low-lying islands. It will operate for two years and then will be reviewed. The project has a dual focus: to build solidarity with the peoples of low-lying nations of the Pacific, and to promote transformative education within Australia, in particular within the Australian Catholic community.

The Pacific Calling Campaign and Partnership brings together individuals, a number of religious orders, school groups, and community organizations (primarily from the Catholic community), to make a personal connection with the peoples of low-lying island nations and to advocate for their future. It recognizes Australia's ecological debt to the people of these nations and the need for Australia to take responsibility for its contribution to climate change and the impacts on its neighbours.

The most significant reason why Kiribati and Torres Strait are the focus of the campaign is because these islands

are, on average, only three meters above sea level. As global temperatures rise and ice caps melt, the seas will rise. Any rise in sea level could potentially swamp these flat, low-lying lands, and there are no hills into which local people can retreat for safety. The islands' natural resources and all living things would become directly under threat as people lost their homes and their freshwater sources became increasingly saline. Higher temperatures will increase coral bleaching, and will negatively effect the islands' vegetation and fauna, and high tides and recurrent severe typhoons would cause even greater devastation.

The Pacific Calling Campaign and Partnership calls for action

"[We are]...calling all Australians to develop links with affected people by listening to their human stories and recognizing our ecological debt to the Pacific and Torres Strait Islands for Australia's prosperity. We are also calling the Australian Government to increase development aid to the Pacific and Torres Strait Islands, set realistic emission targets (60% reduction in greenhouse emissions by 2050), increase renewable energy targets to 20.5% by 2010, ratify the Kyoto Protocol and ensure orderly migration of environmentally displaced people."

The Pacific Calling Campaign and Partnership is involved in the following activities:

- Research – creating scenarios for the future, and roles for Australia
- Linking – connecting with I-Kiribati individuals and organizations
- within Australian communities
- Advocacy – using the media and communicating with interested politicians

The Pacific Calling Campaign and Partnership coordinates a network of sixty people, including representatives of religious and community groups, educators, and students. Partners include: Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes NSW, Catholics in Coalition For Justice and Peace, The Good

Samaritan Sisters, The Missionaries of the Sacred Heart Justice and Peace Centre, Australian Catholic University Institute for Advancing Community Engagement, Catholic Education Office Wollongong, Punake Pasifik Artistic Solution, Pacific Wave Association. The Patron of the Pacific Calling Campaign and Partnership is the Most Reverend Peter Ingham D.D., Bishop of Wollongong, and the president of the Federation of Oceania Bishops' Conference.

Methodological Aspects

The ER Centre's approach to implementing the Earth Charter in their work is two-pronged: to develop ways of integrating environmental considerations into the workplace and staff activities; and to explore ways of integrating the principles into existing social justice education, research and advocacy programmes which are aimed mainly at promoting human rights, such as the Pacific Calling Campaign and Partnership.

Principles of sustainability in the workplace

It was deemed important to ER Centre staff to incorporate the Earth Charter principles they promote in their research and education programmes into their daily lives. To support this practice, the ER Centre held a workshop for staff focused on Principle 7 of the Earth Charter, which encourages people to "Adopt patterns of production, consumption and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights and community wellbeing." The workshop helped staff identify priorities and targets to strengthen the ER Centre's commitment to improving their environmental performance.

As a result of integrating ecological concerns in the ER Centre's practice, the staff developed environmental action plans and nominated teams to implement actions and monitor progress. Some of the actions include the introduction of worm farming, more comprehensive recycling, and the promotion of fair and sustainable trade.

The ER Centre is also seeking perspectives from various Aboriginal communities in order to explore appropriate ways of incorporating the indigenous relationship with the earth into their work with the Earth Charter.

Principles of sustainability in education

The ER Centre encourages schools to use the Earth Charter. On the ER Centre website, for example, they ask visitors – teachers, students, parents, staff, and administrators – to reflect on the school's management and curricula, inside and outside the classroom. The following are a few of the questions they use to stimulate reflection:

- Is your school keen to improve its role as a place that respects and cares for the earth and for one another?
- Do you want to become a no-waste school by 200X?
- Do you want to see some practical changes in your school such as composting, and less water and energy use?
- Do you want to promote an understanding of how our every day actions affect poorer countries?
- Do you want to strengthen links with your local community?
- Do you want your school to more consciously link ethics with actions?

In addition, the ER Centre offers support to schools interested in bringing about changes in their schools, and to help them generate a more integrated 'whole school' approach – where learning goals and outcomes are expressed in all parts of the curriculum and in the life of the school. In support of schools adopting a 'whole school' approach towards sustainability using the Earth Charter, **the ER Centre has identified the following learning approaches:**

i. Cross-curricular programme – Integrate the Earth Charter principles into existing subjects and/or deliver it as an independent unit of study where the core curriculum allows flexibility. For example, science classes

can conduct school energy audits and develop an understanding of greenhouse science and the impacts of global warming; math classes can calculate the costs of waste in both economic and environmental terms; English classes can write letters to political figures emphasizing the need to support renewable energy and find solutions to deforestation; religious education classes can consider the social justice implications of environmental threats, such as declining water quality and climate change, for people living in developing nations and neighbouring countries.

ii. Extracurricular activities – Teachers and students can set up Earth Charter Youth Groups to develop ways of putting into action the mission and aims of the Charter (www.earthcharterinaction.org/youth/). Furthermore, schools can consider strengthening their linkages with local community and environmental groups, e.g. Landcare and neighbourhood centres. These groups can also investigate what their local council is doing to implement Agenda 21 in their community.

iii. Social Justice Coordinators Network – Social justice coordinators and interested teachers can encourage students to form a social justice group, council, or eco-committee to design and plan initiatives for implementing Earth Charter principles at school.

iv. Religious Education and spirituality – Many young people and adults are searching for a meaningful spirituality, and an understanding of the Earth Charter invites us to a renewed sense of God's presence in all creation; one that promotes an inclusive society living in communion with, rather than exploiting, the earth and one that inspires a sense of awe and wonder.

In addition to offering these learning approaches to incorporate the Earth Charter into education for sustainability, the ER Centre is creating a leadership development initiative, called the EcoLeaders Programme.²⁰ EcoLeaders seeks to develop new and emerging leaders in schools, in the community, and in organizations. Social issues are framed to include the environment, justice and non-violence, underpinned by the principles of the Earth Charter. The Earth Charter is used as an educational tool in the EcoLeaders

Programme because it helps to develop an understanding of the issues and critical choices facing humanity and the urgent need for commitment to a sustainable way of life.

EcoLeaders will be supported via a secure web-delivered, do-it-yourself package, comprised of a five-step annual cycle, a recognition framework, and a collaborative learning and administration system. EcoLeaders is an elective, voluntary curricular activity, operating under the umbrella of a sponsoring school. Students are supported by volunteer mentors – teachers, parents, community members – as deemed appropriate by the school. The Programme begins with a daylong workshop involving students and a core team of teachers, mentors and facilitators. Already there is one school, Mercy College in Parramatta Sydney, an all girls Catholic College, which has contacted the ER Centre and has begun to implement this leadership Programme as a pilot project.

The Pacific Calling Campaign and Partnership includes sustainability in education and research

The Pacific Calling Campaign and Partnership has made great strides in giving a 'Pacific face' to education and advocacy campaigns aimed at reducing Australia's greenhouse gas emissions, building awareness and increasing access to Australia for environmental refugees from low-lying islands. The following sections describe actions taken by the Partnership to achieve its objectives.



Waves coming over the causeway- Kiribati Island.

²⁰ The EcoLeaders Programme is in its early stages and the ER Centre is working in partnership with an independent consultant on its development.

(1) Context-specific research and educational materials

The network partners decided that it was important to understand the implications of climate change throughout the Pacific islands, with a specific focus on the islands of Kiribati. In this sense, they are modeling future scenarios if temperature and greenhouse gases levels continue to rise. The research is intended to provide insight for the following issues:

- Migration: ensuring an orderly migration of environmentally displaced people as the islands will be uninhabitable long before they become submerged
- Refugee status: changing the UN's definition of a 'refugee' to include those affected by environmental factors
- Aid: increasing development aid to the Pacific and Torres Strait Islands
- Emission targets: setting realistic targets (60% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050) and increasing renewable energy targets to 20.5% by 2010
- Kyoto Protocol: ratifying the Kyoto Protocol and having Australia accept a stronger commitment for the period 2012-2017
- Preparation: training to help citizens of countries that will have to be evacuated

Using the research gathered so far, the staff from ER Centre put together the "Pacific Calling Education Kit" for high schools and community groups. The kit provides adults and youth with a deeper understanding of climate change, puts the current crisis in context and builds a larger picture of issues facing the low-lying Pacific nations by using the small island nation of Kiribati as a case study. Soon the Partnership will add research on the impacts of climate change on the Torres Strait to enrich the kit. The kit is in demand in New South Wales and across Australia. The Pacific Calling Campaign and Partnership also plans to produce a kit for use at the primary school level.

The material in the education kit is suitable for junior science, geography, HSIE (Human Society and its Environment) and English, as well as other areas of the curriculum. The activities have been designed to accommodate a range of grade levels and can be adapted to student capabilities. Activities are accomplished primarily as small group tasks, while relying on the use of DVD, as well as accessing the Internet, to conduct further research and find additional background and resource materials.

**Working together:
the Diocese of Wollongong
and the Edmund Rice Centre**

"The Catholic Education Office in the Diocese of Wollongong has had a long and rewarding relationship with the Edmund Rice Centre in Sydney. In particular, the Pacific Calling Partnership has been a joint venture that has shown the wisdom and experience of the staff at the Edmund Rice Centre, especially in the way they work with school staff and students. The Co-ordinators of the Programme, Jill Finnane and Louise Robards, are very skilled and knowledgeable presenters who are highly sought after in the education sector for running workshops, student seminars and staff professional development days. The Edmund Rice Centre has also produced a number of excellent resources used by schools, and they are currently co-producing a musical resource with the Catholic Education Office which will have wide-spread application in schools in Australia."

Mark Raue, Head of Religious Education and Learning Services, Catholic Education Office, Diocese of Wollongong

The education kit includes a DVD entitled "Kiribati and Global Warming," produced by a local video production company in Kiribati – Nei Tabera Ni Kai, Inc. (They are planning to produce a version in English to accompany the future Primary School Kit.) The project is also producing a musical CD involving activist song-writers and Pacific and Torres Strait musicians, to help raise awareness of issues associated with climate change – in the hopes of reaching a wider public with the message through music.

Using the ER Centre's DVD – an "eye-opener" in class

"The social justice day presentation to our Year 10s on Pacific and Global Warming by the Edmund Rice Centre team was a real eye opener for our students. I will be using the DVD and kit with my Year 12s when teaching Environmental Ethics in Studies of Religion this year. The DVD is simple, authentic and gets the message across that the island people of Kiribati are feeling the impact of global warming and that we must change."

*Dr John Lee
Curriculum Coordinator, Freeman Catholic
College, Bonnyrigg Heights*

(2) Training on youth leadership

The project is creating a "Youth Skills Exchange and Leadership Training Programme" in partnership with the Sisters of the Good Samaritan and the Catholic Education Office in Wollongong. This Programme was developed in response to the subject of climate change and involves conducting a seminar in Kiribati (October 2007) and sending delegates to the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC) in December 2007.

In the Programme, Australian youth and Kiribati youth will spend a week together in Kiribati sharing their skills

and experiences in social action, environmental change, sustainable living, culture and music. The goals are that by sharing time together, they will learn to listen and understand each other, increase their capacity to work collaboratively, and will create a plan to present at a workshop during the UNFCCC on behalf of Kiribati and the Islands of the Torres Strait. The delegates will include two I-Kiribati and two Australians (one of whom will be a Torres Strait Islander).

These activities are intended to be an experiential learning opportunity that will prepare them to take on strong leadership roles in their communities and open up possibilities for them to work collaboratively with people from different countries and cultures.

(3) Cultural events as part of the education-communication strategy

To increase the awareness of these activities to the wider community, the Pacific Calling Partnership has organized several events, such as the "Voices of the Pacific Conference," hosted by Victoria University; diocesan events; and professional development seminars that have reached 1,500 teachers this year. In addition, cultural events are being organized with the participation of Pacific Island performers (one is scheduled for 15 September 2007). The launch of the music CD will be at a public concert, with entertainment, information, the sale of the Partnership's educational resources, and a speech from a local Member of Parliament.

Lessons learned

Engaging a great number of organizations in the Pacific Calling Campaign and Partnership has allowed the ER Centre to help bring about an awakening within the Catholic community in Australia to their relationship with the peoples of the Pacific and the Torres Strait – as neighbours. According to Louise Robbards at the ER Centre, these efforts to raise awareness on the differentiated impacts of climate change "...is also helping to build a sense of connection between Australians and Pacific Islanders, by celebrating and making known the human stories that bind us."

For the ER Centre staff, education and political action are intertwined. In this sense, the Pacific Calling Campaign and Partnership stresses the importance of recognizing the 'ecological debt' that Australia has to its neighbouring low-lying Pacific and Torres Strait island communities. Australia has a responsibility to help those who are carrying the burdens of ecological imbalances and, towards this recognition, Louise Robbards adds that

"The people from low-lying island nations need our help and understanding to avoid become environmentally displaced people."

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