

Earth Education and Forest School

An interview with Jon Cree, by John Rhymer.

JR: Jon, you have been involved in earth education for a very long time and you are also one of the country's leading Forest School Trainers and Chair of the national Forest School Association. What first attracted you to earth education?

JC: When I first worked at Losehill Hall as a seasonal staff member in about 1984, I met another member of the seasonal staff who had worked with Philippa McMurdo in the Lake District. He told me about earth education and led an earthwalk that I went on. I then discovered that Steve Van Matre had run a workshop at Losehill Hall in the early 1980s. It all felt like pioneering work at that stage. I then went on a Steve Van Matre earth education workshop myself. Steve pulled together all the environmental feelings and understanding of systems that I had been thinking about after reading Fritzof Capra, Dave Foreman and Rachel Carson.

He also summed up what I had felt about education. I had previously worked with a Wildlife Trust that very much followed a "follow me, gather round" approach. I particularly liked the potential for a theatricality aspect, having grown up with amateur dramatics in the family. Another influence was my mother who took us out into natural places every weekend and told us stories.

A group of us at Losehill decided to run Sunship Earth, initially for an American School and then for WATCH members. Many of the people involved in running those early Sunship Earth programmes went on to prominent positions in various environmental organisations.

JR: And what first attracted you to Forest School?

JC: Seeing a group at Bishops Wood with Jenny Doyle (first Forest School Coordinator for Worcestershire). The children were totally engaged with the natural world. I thought that this is what kids should be doing. It reminded me of my own childhood in the bluebell woods.

JR: Briefly, can you say what you feel are the fundamental differences between these two movements/approaches?

JC: Earth Education has a lot more structure and definite outcomes in terms of understandings. Forest school is an emergent process and looks at how children develop. It provides contact with the natural world. It should be easy to build ecological understandings in a FS context as the children and young people are out there for longer over an extended period of months or years. However it takes very skilled leaders to look for opportunities to look for opportunities to build understandings of how the natural world works. This does not always happen. It takes "skilled dialogue" and lots of time. For example, Ade, an experienced tutor at Bishops Wood had been working with a very small group of challenging youngsters for several months, coppicing, building shelters, cooking over fires etc. Eventually some of them wanted to know how trees grew and Ade was able to tell them about leaves and photosynthesis. They were able to put this into context and see how their

actions impacted on the environment. The interest came from the youngsters and this does not always happen. It would be interesting to look at whether there are any long term impacts on behaviours.

In earth education there are definite activities and planned outcomes to help youngsters understand these ecological principles. Research has shown that there are long term impacts from an ee programme.

JR: Do you feel that earth education and forest school are mutually exclusive alternatives or can they complement each other?

JC: It is not a question of one being better than the other or of them being mutually exclusive. They are designed with quite different purposes. I initially saw some synergies but also saw how earth education could get misused in a Forest School context and how earth education could become diluted by including it in Forest School. There is a lot of potential synergy between ee and FS in early years. As children get older, the two approaches diverge though they still complement each other. FS creates a disposition for learning, building self esteem etc. combined with connection with the natural world. This connection is also an important element of an earth education programme but in a one day or 3 day programme there is very little time to build this up though teachers and participants are always encouraged to continue this contact back at school and at home. What earth ed does is give a focussed programme that is 'teaching' ecological concepts and combining these with slightly less structures 'feelings' activities that then provide the basis for action. It is the prolonged contact with the natural world and the focussed ecological learning in ee that gives the complementarity. So I think FS and ee can complement each other but they need to be seen as 2 very different things.

JR: Can you see any ways in which earth education and Forest School can work together or should they remain separate approaches for different contexts, times or ages?

JC: I think people could do an ee programme for children who have had a FS context. However it is best to do so at a different site or a different part of the site as children have such a strong sense of ownership of their FS site. I do sometimes see FS happening with a leader led activity followed by free play. This is a difficult juxtaposition. Children are more engaged when doing their own thing. So it does not usually work to scatter a few earth education activities within FS sessions.

An earthwalk can be a good starting point for slightly older children new to FS as it helps to tune them in to the natural world. In Early Years children already have that natural curiosity. There is an innate playfulness that all young mammals have. There is something wondrous for a young child in picking up a millipede or discovering leaves of different colours.

An earth education programme could offer something different for older youngsters who have been doing FS. The motivation can come from the children if they have been doing project based work at FS. The ee programme would help them to make

some of the connections and understandings. Then back in FS they can apply the knowledge to their project such as making a tree house by minimising their use of resources, avoiding damage to the habitat and so on, now knowing how flow of energy and cycles of materials work.

JR: How would you account for the current popularity of Forest School and the apparent decline in interest in earth education?

JC: I think the decline of interest in earth education might in part be due to Forest School. New Forest School Leaders have often not come across ee. Not enough young adults have been on ee workshops. The FS movement has gone crazy and may have drawn in potential ee leaders. FS has grown because it is seen as fairly easy to do, but this can mean that FS is not gone into in a deeper way – it can be seen as just 'playing in the woods'. It is time to have a rest from the school routine and recharge, 'oh its the Wednesday afternoon activity'. However if taken seriously it is about working with that 'play' and seeing the benefits and opportunities to skilfully draw out and build on the learning. With ee it takes a lot of effort to craft ee props and deliver an ee programme.

When done properly, in a fully integrated way, FS can make strong links with the curriculum and ecological care and understanding in the same way as an ee programme can. However this only happens in a handful of schools in the whole country. Generally FS is just used as a learning tool and not really integrated back into the classroom. Earth Education programmes are designed and structured to do this. However it takes a really motivated and dedicated teacher supported by an equally committed Head teacher to use an ee programme fully back in school. Sometimes people offer one off FS sessions or a short experience as part of a residential. This is not really FS. Equally an earthwalk on its own is not earth education, enjoyable though it might be.

Forest School is a name, a reputation, a buzzword out in schools. People do not necessarily know what it is but they have heard of it. Earth Education has never had this profile in schools though it used to have a very high profile amongst environmental educators.. They can see that FS can give that deep connection with the natural world and a deep sense of place, providing the leader does not see the wood as a back drop for learning rather than an integral part of learning. Earth Education programmes can be too short to do that on their own without youngsters being encouraged to continue those connections back home and in their school grounds. What ee programmes do is give a concrete understanding of ecological systems and a context for issues such as climate change and the hope is that continued contact with the natural world after the initial programme will provide the 'heart' to work with the understandings and encourage change in lifestyle. It is this latter transfer that requires lots of effort by the educator to support the learners in following through on the initial 'short' programme.

JR: Do you introduce any earth education techniques into Forest School training?

JC: The one ee thing that we do as part of FS training is “Magic Spots”. After every course we get teachers reporting back that they are using “Magic Spots” with their children. When visiting sites to assess the trainee leaders I see “Magic Spots” being used regularly. The kids love it and sometimes ask if they can go off to do their own “Magic Spots”. Even an individual child might do this and the other children respect their space and keep the noise down. Of course these opportunities to be quiet and alone with nature are not exclusive to ee. Even Rachel Carson used to write about her “sit place” on the coast of Maine.

John Rhymer October 2014