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YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY

The Asia-Pacific region is one of the most diverse in the world. It includes the world's highest mountain ranges, some of its largest areas of desert, tropical forests of great richness and diversity, and some of the world's greatest rivers including the Ganges, Brahmaputra, Yellow, Yangtze, and Mekong rivers. It includes great continental nations such as China and India, the two most populous nations in the world, many smaller countries with large populations such as Indonesia and Thailand, nation continents such as Australia with huge landmasses but with very small populations, and geographically tiny but very influential city-states such as Singapore. It also includes island nations of astonishing diversity ranging from Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea to New Zealand and Fiji.

The diversity of geographical form and settlement is matched by the diversity of cultures and traditions. Major language groups represented in the Asia Pacific include Turkic, Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Tibeto-Burman, Mon-Khmer, Anamese, Sino-Tibetan-Chinese, Australian (Aboriginal) and Austronesian together with Germanic and Italic (or Romance) languages from European settlement in countries throughout the region. Within these families there are very many individual languages. In Papua New Guinea alone there are some 700 distinct languages.

All the great religions in the world, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism are present in the region in a bewildering variety of alternative forms. They are matched by an even greater variety of local religious traditions. Powerful international secular traditions such as Marxism/Communism have also been very influential, particularly in China and Vietnam. Democratic systems of many different kinds, from the most open to the most restricted, are to be found across the region.

The region includes economically developed countries such as Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, Australia and New Zealand, countries that are rapidly developing such as China, India, and Korea, and others that are at an earlier stage of development. Just as there is great economic diversity between countries in the region, there are also extremes of wealth and poverty between and within individual countries.

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John Fien, David Yencken and Helen Sykes (eds), 1—8.

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The Asia Pacific region has experienced some of the world's most significant economic growth in the last decades. Despite recent setbacks, the region is still expected to become a dominant economic centre during this century, matching if not surpassing the two current dominant centres, the USA and the European Union. Japan is already one of the world's leading economies. Singapore, Taiwan and Korea have all enjoyed remarkable growth. China is regularly predicted to become the largest economy in the world in the current century. India has also experienced significant economic growth.

Despite being home to some of the world's largest and fastest growing economies, the Asia Pacific region is also one of great poverty. The acute impact of the 1997 economic collapse in the region is evidence of the precarious nature of some of the last three decades of development efforts. Thus, the Asia Pacific region is home to over two-thirds of the world's poor while an equal percentage lack basic literacy. Populations have doubled over the past forty years and are still on the increase, and the environmental and social effects of such numbers are beginning to take their toll. Thus UNESCO has noted that:

By the year 2040, the population of the Asia Pacific region is expected to have doubled to an astounding 3.3 billion people. The region is already home to 63 percent of the world's population – China, India, Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The world has never seen such growth in so short a time. By 2040 requirements for food will have doubled and the need for water and sanitation quadrupled. The consumption of energy and manufactured goods will increase fivefold, while pollution may increase up to tenfold. (UNESCO-PROAP, 1996)

The environmental costs have already been very high. Environmental conditions in Asia and the Pacific are becoming increasingly well-documented, as seen in reports of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (1990), the World Bank (1993), the Asian Development Bank (1997) and the United Nations Environmental Programme's Global Environmental Outlook reports (UNEP 1997 and 1999). These publications paint a generally bleak picture of a descending spiral of unsustainable development. The Asian Development Bank's report *Emerging Asia: Changes and Challenges* (1997), states that:

Asia is the world's most polluted and environmentally degraded region ... The range of environmental problems is huge – from the degradation of rural land to the pollution and congestion of the region's mega cities. (p. 201)

The environmental problems of the Asia Pacific region have also to be understood within a global picture of continuing environmental degradation. In this book we do not comment further on these overall trends and threats but for those interested they are fully documented in the two UNEP reports, cited above, the publications of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the predictions from its supercomputer modelling of the Hadley Centre of the British Meteorological Office, Earthwatch publications and publications of the World Conservation Monitoring Centre and many other similar reports.

THE RESEARCH

It is for all these different reasons that studies of environmental conditions, attitudes and behaviour in the Asia Pacific region are of such significance. The focus of the research reported and discussed in this book is on attitudes to nature and on environmental practices and responses in the Asia Pacific region.

The research was carried out in ten main countries: Australia, Brunei, China, Fiji, India, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, Thailand, and the USA (as a country of great size and influence bordering the region). Researchers from other countries, including Korea, Indonesia (Bali), the Philippines and Papua New Guinea also participated in aspects of the study.

The research had two main components. The first part was a review of the cultural influences on environmental attitudes, behaviour and institutional responses in individual countries. This part of the research provided a brief picture of the land and society, a review of traditional attitudes to nature, and a summary of the state of the environment and the politics of the environment in each country or region. It also reviewed adult environmental attitudes, the development of environmental education and the attitudes of young people as reflected in other studies in the country concerned. Summary commentaries on this part of the research are included in individual chapters of this book.

The second part of the research involved detailed comparative investigations of the attitudes, awareness and behaviour of young people across the region. These specific studies were carried out in Melbourne and Brisbane, Australia; Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei; Guang Zhou and Hong Kong, China; Bangalore, India; Tokyo, Japan; Auckland and Hamilton, New Zealand; Singapore; Hat Yai, Thailand; Suva, Fiji and Los Angeles, Seattle and Portland, USA.

These comparative studies of young people had two components. The first was a comprehensive questionnaire survey, administered in class (See Appendix A). The second was focus group discussion with smaller groups of students to explore their feelings about these issues. The questionnaire surveys examined:

- National priorities
- Assessments of environmental problems, nationally and globally
- Beliefs about the economy and environment
- Environmental beliefs
- Awareness and knowledge
- Behaviour
- Influences on behaviour
- Sources and assessed reliability of information
- Frequency of discussion in school and at home.

Over 10,000 questionnaires were administered across the region.

In the parallel focus group studies the themes discussed were:

- Hopes and fears about the future
- Concerns about the future
- Sources of information
- Causes of environmental problems

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