

Going green by being nature smart

Published in: New Straits Times, Friday 13 October 2017

By Dr Adha Shaleh

Source : <https://www.nst.com.my/opinion/columnists/2017/10/290588/going-green-being-nature-smart>

Naturalistic intelligence (NI) develops during periods of long observation of natural patterns in the environment. This kind of intelligence matures from childhood, as people feel connected to nature. Important skills become apparent when people like naturalists, botanists and traditional medicine practitioners gain the ability to analyse natural facts, and begin exploring human and environmental relationships.

Typically referred to as “nature smart”, NI can enable people to heighten their sensitivity to environmental changes. In turn, this gift may impact conservation efforts in positive ways, as NI is deeply rooted in a sensitive, ethical and holistic view of nature.

In line with the recent plan to introduce environmental education as a module in schools, NI can be an important component of that plan. The key here is the strategies to nurture NI in our education. In other words, how do we teach an engaging environmental course for preschool, primary and secondary students?

The nation’s environmental education may be enhanced by utilising “outdoor learning” as the primary learning method. For example, to engage in thinking about their environment, let children play with nature materials. Drawings provide a powerful tool for educators to enhance children’s perceptions of their environment, especially in areas where conservation awareness is urgently needed.

Frequent outdoor engagement could strengthen children’s affinity for the environment. A further benefit is that activities of this kind encourage them to experience first-hand different aspects of the ecosystem. This method is suitable for young minds in the stage of inquisition and imagination.

At higher levels, however, students should get hands-on experience in environmental education from field trips to natural areas. In this regard, teachers can enhance and strengthen students’ NI with lectures on crucial aspects of conservation. For students to accumulate sophisticated perceptions of the environment, they should be given the opportunity to observe human interaction with the environment and retain their remarks as field notes.

The combination of classroom and field lessons may be expected to increase the students’ appreciation of the effects of human activity on nature, and the impact of land-use changes and landscape fragmentation on wildlife and its habitat. The field method of nurturing enhances students’ critical-thinking skills, and the ability to share insights may help generate creative responses to address environmental issues.

A further lesson from the analysis of environmental education is that it is not limited to training the mind and filling it with information, but involves all aspects of intellectual, moral, culture, religious beliefs and even the NI of the learner.

As most of the younger generation hope for a future with green development, it is essential to start applying approaches to show the future leaders that true learning affects one's behaviour. Whoever makes practical use of his knowledge today, his intelligence will be better utilised in the future. In that regard, it is important for our young generation to start learning about nature as early as possible.

Early environmental experience thus plays a big role in promoting platforms and support among the younger generations. Now that Malaysia has its environmental syllabus for schools, it is a sufficient evidence to suggest that people will respect nature and conserve the environment if they know them intimately.

This writer has looked into NI and its possibilities in the nation's education. It is most important to bring up a young mind for his heart is pure, his vision is like a jewel, his mind is plain without any inscription yet. He is ready to receive any information.

While the core element in NI stresses on character formation of our children, the major outcome of this concept is to create an ethical system from a very young age.

In his book, *The Ethical Philosophy of Al-Ghazzali*, M. Ummaruddin observes that a defective ethical system is due to a defective human psychology. He says there is no sound ethical system without a firm psychological foundation. Thus, it may be said that erroneous attitudes like those who fail to commit to environmental sustainability rise because they are based on the assumption that human beings are essentially the masters of the universe. On the other hand, communities like those during the Prophet's time that set aside sanctuaries for environmental protection arise because they recognise that man and animals are part of the universe.

Looking at the bigger picture, NI is not only about character formation of a person. It offers a route to learn about environmental wisdom, which is very fundamental in environmental education. It has been said that whoever applies wisdom in his life has indeed practised common good for his society. To quote the Quran: "He grants wisdom to whom he pleases, and whoever is granted wisdom is indeed granted abundant good." (2: 269).

DR ADHA SHALEH is a research fellow at International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia adha@iais.org.my