



## **Climate Crisis: Education, Environment, Sustainability**

In the following paired entries, Jeff Stickney and Adrian Skilbeck introduce the recent special issue of the PESGB's *Journal of Philosophy of Education (JOPE)*, entitled [\*Climate Crisis: Education, Environment, Sustainability\*](#) and co-edited by Jeff and Adrian. The table of contents can be viewed [here](#). Contributors' names are hyperlinked to their pieces in the special issue. At the time of writing, some pieces are open access: where this is the case, links have been give to the full article.

## By Jeff Stickney

Having retired from teaching secondary school Geography and Philosophy (Astronomy, English, and Theory of Knowledge), and with teaching graduate level Philosophy of Education courses now a decade in the past, I am currently teaching (part-time) Environmental Sustainability Education (ESE) with teacher candidates in the Master of Teaching Program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at University of Toronto. What a pleasure it is to share with these bright and enthusiastic educators ways of embedding ESE in all teaching subjects, and also the recent thinking of my colleagues in both Environmental Education and Philosophy of Education.

As you will find, in the Editors' Introduction (Stickney and Skilbeck, 2020) and [the pieces themselves](#), many of the contributions to the Special Issue are multidisciplinary in nature, and each has a different line of inquiry. My own approach to ESE is multidisciplinary, place- and arts-based, and genealogical in a philosophical sense of disrupting with untimely meditations our enthrallment to dangerous perceptions and patterns of life (our unhealthy *habitus* and *bedrock*). I try in my work to elucidate alternate paths through ESE, towards thinking and acting differently in our daily life, as readers may find in my contributions in this Special Issue (see Stickney 2020a; Stickney and Bonnett, 2020), as well as in my separate JOPE paper on seeing the oak tree anew at New College, Oxford (Stickney 2020b).

Perhaps a reason Paul Standish reached out to ask me to work with Adrian in co-editing this Special Issue is that I incorporated an environmental theme in my keynote talk for the British Wittgenstein Society meeting at UCL (2018), co-sponsored by PESGB. In that talk ([Stickney 2020c](#)), being edited for publication by Paul and Adrian for a Wiley book of the proceedings, I applied Wittgenstein's discussion in *On Certainty* of the physicist not being able 'to find his/her feet' with a witch doctor, to our bewilderment with climate-science deniers: whether populist leaders like Trump and Bolsonaro, or fundamentalists who do not share common bedrock knowledge around geologic history, making informed discussion of anthropogenic and non-anthropogenic causes of climate change impossible. How can we persuade them that we are recklessly causing accelerated warming last seen 56-million years ago, as described in our Editors' Introduction:<sup>1</sup> an event dramatized as the 'Great Withering' awaiting us in Michael Christie's (2019) dystopic novel *Greenwood*? The magnitude of this catastrophe is daunting!

Maddening to the point of despair, yet so much more gratifying to act. While the contributors to the Special Issue are not interested in spreading false optimism, we are also not willing to give up. I have three grandsons now, and could not face them or my students with a defeatist message. But I worry deeply that we are not on track to halt global average temperatures rising 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial times; halving our carbon emissions by 2030; and weaning ourselves from oil by 2050. The numbers are going the wrong way: fires rage, sea ice diminishes, and extinctions tally upward daily.

When Adrian and I recorded our [video abstract](#) for the journal, I found myself musing with some melancholy on Radiohead's "Daydreaming" lyrics:

Dreamers/ They never learn/ They never learn/ Beyond the point/ Of no return/ Of no return/ Then it's too late/ The damage is done/ The damage is done.

This goes/ Beyond me/ Beyond you. /A white room /By a window/  
Where the sun comes/ Through. / We are just happy to serve/ Just happy to serve you.

(Sung drearily by Thom Yorke as he passes through 23 doors to an outside vista. With a three-count turning into a rapid-tempo six-count piano score, 1-2-3/2-3-3...; 123456/123456...we feel time quickly slipping away.)

In closing, I riff on some of these allegorical and hortatory themes:

Educators / They need to learn / Need to learn what can be done. /  
Beyond the point / of turning away. / Of staying in the dark. / It's not too late / Not too late to act. / But the damage *is* being done. / So much damage is done.



This calls upon me / Calls upon you. / A classroom / By a window/ Where  
the sun comes / Through. / We are just happy to serve / Just happy to  
serve you.

Read with us dreamers, talk with us and tell others. Act now. These troubles  
are not here to stay if we work together, and like Greta Thunberg demand  
from our politicians the urgent changes needed.

#### **Notes**

1. This rise in carbon dioxide and global temperature levels was last seen fifty-six million years ago, but occurred gradually over perhaps ten thousand years (and lasted another 80,000–120,000 years) due to undersea volcanoes erupting across the planet. It devastated the canopy of the global forest, and significantly diminished the number of species living on the earth. We are doing this now in mere decades, through our smoke stacks, tail pipes and meat production, reversing in only 150 years what had been a cooling trend for the last 6,500 years. In terms of earth's long-range cycles, we have rapidly turned what was an ice house climate into a hot house climate, and seem to have no collective or political sense of the peril that follows from this wild trajectory. (Stickney and Skilbeck, 2020, p.2)

## By Adrian Skilbeck

When it seems as if we encounter headlines on a daily basis reminding us that we only have so many years to save ourselves from planetary catastrophe or other headlines indicative of the cost of failing to take seriously enough the human impact on the environment, the temptation is to give in to despair. We do not shy away from this in the Special Issue. Our contributors are not so naïve. Perhaps we have, as [Paul Standish](#) suggests, reached a state of exhaustion, our depleted educational reserves mirroring the depleted reserves of the planet. And yet, what comes through is a spirit of hope and possibility. It is there in [Roz Birch](#)'s 'Discerning Hope,' in [Victor Swillens and Joris Vlieghe](#)'s piece 'Finding Soil,' and in [Simon Heath](#)'s "'Mother Trees" and Teachers.'

It has felt at times that the special issue was in danger of being overwhelmed by the event that has shaped 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than a looming, impending catastrophe, we were suddenly confronted by one in which we were all immediately enmeshed. It was inevitable that contributors would want to make connections. [Heesoon Baim](#) offers a rich, Zen-based reimagining of environmental education that can lead towards a different kind of relationship with the natural world, one that heals rather than wounds both parties. It remains to be seen how the impact of COVID will reshape thinking on environmental issues. It has certainly sharpened our awareness of what is at stake and how we are struggling to find balance between human and non-human need. The lockdown provided a glimpse of what might be possible. In

this period of anthro-pause, skies were clear, pollution levels plummeted, the natural world was once more at our fingertips and in our nostrils and our ears, rather than out of reach, muffled and hidden. It invited a different kind of response, one echoed in the work of [Sharon Todd](#), [Ramsey Affifi](#), [Gordon Bearn](#) and [Jeff Stickney's discussion with Michael Bonnett](#).

As educators, our practices always have one eye on the future as well as the present. So too do those we teach, and a serious response to the claims of those for whom the future seems increasingly compromised is evident throughout the Special Issue, in the work of [Katrien van Poeck and Leif Östman](#) as well as [Östman's work with Carl Anders Säfstrom](#). Clearly the impact of Greta Thunberg and the *Skolstrejk för Klimatet* on the public and academic imagination has been significant, and we wanted the special issue to reflect this, not only in articles addressing her praxis (see [Adrian Skilbeck's](#) contribution) but also in terms of her emblematic embodiment of young people's agency. In bearing witness to the anxieties and frustration of many, her actions have put to question the role of educators, policy makers and politicians. If we are to grant children agency and help give them a voice in their own lives, as [Anna Kouppanou](#) argues we must, then we need to support not only young people but those entering the teaching profession and those already struggling to provide environmental and sustainability education, in both formal and informal settings, beyond the diktats of the curriculum (see [Snowy Evans's](#) and [Hilary Inwood's](#) pieces). Why should we assume that well-

informed young people would not want to act on the knowledge acquired through education and put it to use in the world?

It was important to recognise the dimension of justice in environmental education, to address non-white, non-western, non-colonialist perspectives and how ESE might both transform and be transformed in order to do so. Several contributors addressed this issue, including [Yulia Nesterova](#), [Sean Blenkinsop](#) and [Mark Fettes](#). The intersection with issues of race, land ownership and socio-cultural histories is one that would benefit from further research, a point acknowledged by [Alan Reid](#) when he highlights the need for research on policy that looks beyond western conceptual frameworks. Reid speaks of education, research and policy that fosters ‘a respect for the integrity and freedom of the natural world.’ Finding the right balance, as he observes elsewhere, is a matter of ensuring that engagement is neither overly detached nor overly naïve. Both these points shine through in the special issue, with a powerful personal commitment and willingness to experiment with form and tone allied to more traditional scholarly virtues. As well as a balance between the demands of the academic world and the needs of a wider public, there is a balance to be struck between urgency and alarmism, between optimism and realism, between acknowledging the strengths of current practice where they exist and the need to transform those far from perfect settings where they do not. The current climate crisis demands nothing less of us.

## References

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