



Success Stories

A teacher's life-changing experience towards promoting environmental and human wellbeing

by Emmanuel Koro



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In a country where environment and agriculture are not taught formally as subjects in schools, a teacher from South Africa's West Cape Region finds himself teaching these subjects to learners who are very willing to learn. The main motivation is simply to help promote balanced approaches to conservation and development which will benefit both the people and the environment.

What Mr Melvin Losper, the principal of Protea Park Primary School, is doing, together with his school, is fully supported by the South African government, as evidenced by the support he receives from the local municipality.

UNESCO has a special term to describe the type of education that Mr Losper is currently supporting. They call it Education for Sustainable Development (ESD); a concept that UNESCO is promoting during the UN Decade of ESD until 2014.

"I think it is high time subjects such as environment and agriculture are formally introduced as stand-alone subjects in South African schools, both at primary and secondary school levels," said Mr Losper. "I would also suggest such subjects be taught at nursery school because they also produce our future leaders."

To gain the full support of his school, Mr Losper first had to show teachers and learners that ignoring the need to balance both environment and people's needs would threaten both the future of people and the environment.

He said that for us to transform mind-sets and lifestyles, we need to use very effective strategies. He stated, "Let us stop crying in order to convince other people to balance the economic development with environmental needs. All we need is to make each other aware of the benefits of doing so and the threats of not doing so. The message is simple. You mess up the environment and you have messed up the future of your children and those of generations that will come after them."

Mr Losper first experienced an attitude and lifestyle change when he was studying for a BA in education at the University of Western Cape in 1995. He learnt about the need to balance human and environmental needs from one of his degree courses which focused on environmental issues. "The need to balance human economic and environmental needs is like a seesaw balance, once either of the two sides is not balanced, one or both will suffer. The suffering can bring loss of life for both humans and the environment," said Mr Losper. "After learning this, I have a compelling responsibility to pass on such important survival lessons to my school and my community."

He works together with Ms Lona Dewaal to run a school recycling project that has been growing tremendously since he introduced it at the school four years ago. One of the visible indicators of the impact of the Protea Primary School recycling project is the gradual disappearance of piles of illegally dumped waste in some parts of the community. "In the past, the truck from a company that buys recyclables used to come once every three months to collect recyclables from our school, but now it comes monthly," he said. The project earns the school a handsome monthly income that is used to buy recreational facilities for the learners.

Mr Losper recently took his school on a visit to a local dumpsite in order to teach the learners about the dangers of illegal dumping. This turned out to be a very effective attitude changing strategy. "The bad smell that was coming from the visited dumpsite, the unsightly nature of waste material and the immediate realisation that this is also a health hazard disgusted the learners from my school so much that they promised to stop such illegal dumping in their community through collecting recyclables and reusables in order to reduce waste and littering," said Mr Losper. This became a timely wake up call for the learners to start doing something to benefit both the people and the environment.

Atlantis Community is an industrial town in the West Cape Region. Here, plastic bottles, paper and chemical pollutants often end up polluting the nearby Atlantic Ocean, killing ocean creatures, including fish that people depend on for their livelihoods. In order to address this problem, Protea Primary School conducts four clean-ups per year of a nearby Atlantic Ocean beach.

Atlantis community has four primary schools and four high schools. Mr Losper sees these schools as potential and viable sites to spread the message calling for the need to balance economic needs and environmental needs. He recently convinced the principal of the Saxon Sea Primary School to start running their own school recycling project. His next goal is to spread the message to local high schools that are currently not running recycling projects.

Mr Losper also works with the West Cape Coast Biosphere, a conservation organisation that campaigns for the upkeep of the West Cape Biosphere. Headed by Ms Janette du Toit, the West Cape Biosphere sponsors Protea Primary School learners to go on environment and development educational tours throughout the West Cape Biosphere, four times annually.

Fortunately, Mr Losper is not fighting a lone battle. There are other residents of the West Cape Biosphere who are also making excellent efforts towards balancing human economic developments with environmental needs. They run projects that are supported by West Cape Biosphere Office, World Wide Fund (WWF), the government and the private sector. These projects include: the !Khattu eco-tourism project that raises awareness about all aspects of the SAN culture, the Eendekuil Aloe Project, the removal of *Prosopis* trees and giant reeds, and the Fryer's Cove Eco-garden.

Mr Losper thinks that it is only when community driven processes have been set in motion worldwide, that we can guarantee future generations a world that is safe for both mankind and nature.

Further information:

<http://www.capebiosphere.co.za/>

As lead agency for the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), UNESCO promotes an education that allows every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to shape a sustainable future.

Education for Sustainable Development means including key sustainable development issues into teaching and learning; for example, climate change, disaster risk reduction, biodiversity, poverty reduction, and sustainable consumption. It also requires participatory teaching and learning methods that motivate and empower learners to change their behaviour and take action for sustainable development.

It engages people through innovative ways of learning about biodiversity by focusing on education and training to address the interlinking issues of ecosystems and livelihoods, the interactions of nature with culture, society and economy, and the actions we can take without affecting our quality of life.

Biosphere Reserves are sites recognized under the UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme which innovate and demonstrate approaches to conservation and sustainable development. The Decade offers an opportunity to develop and enhance the concept of Biosphere Reserves as learning sites for sustainable development, and strengthen their education and outreach programmes.

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