

The Great Brain Robbery

An online Canadian Geographic survey asks, "What was the greatest eco crime of the 21st century?" One person answered that it was "knowledge stolen from youth," referring to the absence — common in many Canadian schools — of authentic education about global environmental issues and their causes (see the survey at <http://www.canadiangeographic.ca/surveys/ecocrime/comments.asp>).

A similar theft occurs daily in most U.S. classrooms as well. The assault comes from two directions. The first is from corporations that donate educational materials that distort the truth. Some examples include:

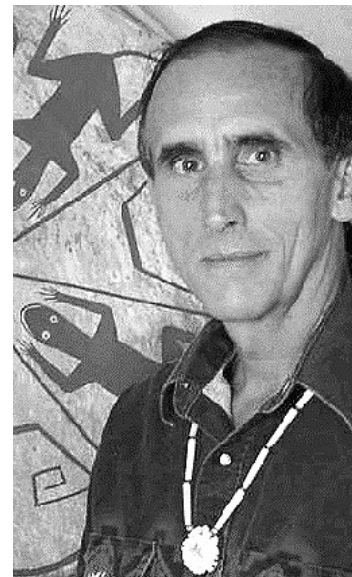
- A teaching kit produced by International Paper that informs students that cutting mature trees ultimately promotes the growth of trees;
- Exxon's "Aquarium Without Walls," which explains how gasoline is really a form of solar power;
- A video and teacher's guide produced by the coal industry's "Greening Earth Society" that describes global warming as a fallacy;
- The American Farm Bureau's teaching materials that encourage teachers to rethink the dangers of chemical pesticides;
- Chevron's video and teacher's guide on global warming that pretend there is great doubt about the danger of greenhouse gases;
- Dow Chemical's video called "Chemipalooza," in which dancing teenagers sing about nature's glorious chemicals;
- An activity book distributed by the American Coal Foundation that explains how increased carbon dioxide brought on by global warming makes plants grow larger.

The second pool of "brain robbers" includes lobby groups that represent pro-free market interests and the religious right. These groups have been successful

in getting state educational boards to censor environmental textbooks, as occurred in Texas when Citizens for a Sound Economy (CSE) convinced the State Board of Education that several environmental textbooks were anti-Christian, anti-free enterprise, and anti-American. The Board selected a text sponsored by a consortium of mining companies. According to Adele P. Kimmel, an attorney involved in a pending suit against the Board, "The Board's decision to choose an environmental science text financed by the mining industry over one written by a scientist that emphasizes the importance of critical-thinking is no accident" (http://www.tlpj.org/pr/texas_103003.htm).

Like the corporations referred to above, anti-environmental lobby groups such as CSE are impacting environmental education across the country. They have deceptive names like The Environmental Education Working Group and The Center for Environmental Education, two of the most influential lobbying groups of them all. The Center, sponsored by the Harry Bradley Foundation, one of the largest foundations in the country supporting right-wing causes and organizations, is being hired by school boards across the country to analyze environmental course curriculum. (To understand the Center's philosophy, read its director's short article "Environmental Education in Wisconsin," which appeared in the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute Report, June, 1996, Vol. 9, No. 5, and which can be accessed at <http://my.execpc.com/~presswis/enviro.html>.)

If our schools ignore or do not encourage students to discuss critically the negative environmental impact of our values, institutions, ideologies, technologies, politics, religious assumptions, and materialistic obsessions, then education will remain a tool of those few who benefit from our ignorance and who will continue to steal not only our youths' potential for wisdom, but also the beautiful world that was created for all of us to enjoy. □



Four Arrows
(Don Trent Jacobs)

Can we afford to let our children's education be controlled by forces hostile to their interests — and to the interests of the planet?

Four Arrows (Don Trent Jacobs) is an associate professor in the College of Education at Northern Arizona University and a faculty member at Fielding Graduate Institute. He is the author of numerous books and articles, some of which can be reviewed at his website at www.teachingvirtues.net.