The Great Brain Robbery

A n online Canadian Geographic sur-
vey 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 re-
  think 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 green- 
  house 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 cen-
sor 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 pend-
ing suit against the Board, “The Board’s 
decision to choose an environmental sci-
ce text financed by the mining industry 
over one written by a scientist that empha-
sizes 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 
9, No. 5, and which can be accessed at 
<http://my.execpc.com/~presswis/ 
enviro.html>.)

If our schools ignore or do not 
courage students to discuss critically 
the negative environmental impact of our 
values, institutions, ideologies, technolo-
gies, 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. 回