

Being a good “interface” <Part 4>

Interpreters - connecting people with nature

Environmental education and behavior change

The aim of agricultural extension is to cause behavior change among farmers through extension activities. Also in environmental education, we aim to engender behavior change, by creating a positive cycle of feel – know – think – act. However, it is difficult to expect people to change their behavior after participating in a one-off event type program.

Therefore it is important for a one-off event type program to trigger participants’ entry into the above-mentioned cycle through strength of feeling. Furthermore, when people participate in second and third programs as “repeaters”, the probability of these experiences leading to behavior change will be higher.

Work of interpreters

An interpreter plays the role of connecting people and nature in environmental education programs. Interpretation in this case means to communicate fascinating and interesting aspects of nature, culture and history to participants in an easily understandable manner. The main aim is not to teach. Interpreters need to be able to stimulate interests and enlighten participants. Therefore rather than simply communicating his/her knowledge, interpreters need to have the skills to communicate the message behind the knowledge.

Ingenious ways to make an impression

As they say, “people forget what they hear, remember what they see and understand what they do”, people do not get a particularly strong impression if information is simply communicated. Hence it is important to think how we can create long lasting strong impressions. For this to occur, three points are critically important: (1) the interpreters’ fine quality, (2) appropriate program design, and (3) development of effective materials.



Scenes from training at the Whole Earth Nature School

Environmental education on mangroves in Oman

In the environmental education program in Oman, there were many participants who were new to mangroves. Therefore we put the emphasis on reflection from the viewpoint of how the program can move participants, and how we can ensure that the feeling stimulated by the program can be retained for a long time. In order to explore this, we came up with a reflection session whereby participants are asked to put stickers on the activities they enjoyed, so that they can realize how they enjoyed the program as a whole, reflecting on mangrove forests and ecosystems.

Although our aim is to convey the message on the importance of richness of mangrove ecosystems and the need for conservation, the first step we thought should be for participants to learn about mangrove forests and feel them at first hand. Therefore the materials we developed and used in the program were those which would easily familiarize participants with mangroves, such as a mangrove quiz, a nature game using role play and a bingo card game.

In interpretation, it is important to make the linkage between the intent of the “tellers” and the interest of “listeners” to ensure what is supposed to be communicated actually will be communicated. This necessitates appropriate tools and skills. We visited various organizations which were introduced in our AAINews series entitled “From the frontline of environmental education” and we conducted training sessions on interpretation.

Just like the communication skills of extension workers, which are necessary for extension activities, there are certain skills which interpreters can obtain through training. There are also skills you can only gain through cumulative experiences. This necessitates a daily process of trial and error and diligent effort.



Environmental education on mangroves – reflecting on the program