

About the Cover Art

Cover Essay: Children and EcoHealth

Until two centuries ago, people died in a world not much different to the world into which they were born. Human activity was the same, illness was the same, and the environment was the same. It is very different now. The world in which we die will be very different from the world into which we were born. The Internet, globalization of the economy, and global warming didn't exist or were unknown when most of us were born. Yet all of these issues which have an impact on us every day will affect us to an even greater extent each year that we live. The world that children now inherit is very different from the world we once knew. As an EcoHealth practitioner, I am not proud of the condition of the world I am giving to my children.

The major impediment to solving the world's environmental problems today is the knowledge-attitude-action disconnect. We know that human activity is hurting our world. Every day there is environmental news in the papers. Documentaries effectively display the threat of global warming, loss of fishing stocks, loss of the rain forest, and the increase in weather-related natural disasters. We do not lack data. We do not lack an understanding of the mechanisms by which our planet's ecosystem is deteriorating. We lack the effective translation of this knowledge into attitudinal change, which in turn should translate into action. The knowledge of our failing ecosystems has not changed the population's attitude from consumption of resources to their conservation, from exploitation of the ecosystem to its sustainability, and from the need for certain proof of harm to the adoption of the precautionary principle. In turn, even if some of our attitudes have changed, the change in our attitudes has not translated into a change in our actions—for we still use fossil fuels instead of renewable energy sources, and we still maximize our

ecological footprint rather than minimizing it. Our attitudes and practices will become our children's attitudes unless our generation is the one to make the needed change. Our knowledge of ecosystem destruction and ecological rehabilitation must be translated into attitudes of sustainability both for ourselves and our children, which in turn must be translated into use of renewable energy, sustainable land use practices, and other actions that restore and preserve our ecosystem. For many of us, the environment is something abstract or far away, whereas for our children, its disintegration will be the single greatest determinant of their health.

The health of our children is the reason we must change. We might say our own health is the reason to change, but I beg to differ. Although there were noted environmental pioneers sounding environmental alarms in the early 20th century, the adult generation now living is the first generation that is aware that human activity is negatively affecting the world overall, not just patches of it here and there. We know that we are losing our planetary oxygen-generating capacity as we cut down vegetation. We know that we are losing our planetary thermoregulation as we put more and more carbon dioxide into the air. We know that we are removing vast areas of our landscape through toxification, earth erosion, and salination. On the other hand, we have excellent scientific and policy analyses, including the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, which clearly tell us where we have gone wrong and what we can do to restore our planet. We have the intellectual and financial resources to make the needed changes but we, as yet, have collectively failed to take action. Our children have had no input into this choice and still, pollution and global warming threaten their existence. Our children

inherit what we leave them. We must leave them a world in which they will thrive.

Not only is the health of our children the reason to change but also, the health of our children will be the catalyst for change. The health of our children is a “superordinate goal”—an idea that transcends all cultures and political boundaries. Wars have stopped to promote the health of children. “Days of Peace” interrupted the Nicaraguan conflict to vaccinate children—days in which negotiations occurred to end the conflict. The Canada International Scientific Exchange Program (CISEPO) has created teams of Israeli, Jordanian, and Palestinian health professionals who work together to diagnose and treat hearing loss in children in the area of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Because the CISEPO program treats children, it has been a consistent bridge among the three warring sides for the last 10 years. Similarly, the health of children may just be the focal point needed to unite people with differing views about the environment. Who can argue with the importance of healthy children? Children have nothing to do with the creation of the world into which they were born, and therefore it is the responsibility of those with the power to make the world in which they grow up to be the safest and most nurturing place possible. Environmentalists, mining companies, manufacturers, and first nations people have difficulty agreeing on anything related to the environment but they might find points of agreement when it comes to promoting the health of our children. Perhaps the overriding principle behind every decision is not how the decision might affect the environment, but how might it affect our children or our children’s children. The first nations’ principle of making decisions that consider seven generations past and seven generations to come rings true. The reason for change is the health threat to our children, but the catalyst for change can also be the health of our children. The power of the universal desire to help children has the potential to unite us in the quest towards a planet in ecological equilibrium.

When I read Kate Davies’ article on the costs of childhood illnesses and disabilities, I am shocked by the financial cost, let alone the physical and emotional suffering resulting from the degradation of our environment. It reminds me that when I graduated from medical school, I did not consider pediatrics because I did not think I could ever deal with a severely ill or dying child. Now, I practise mostly pediatrics and I now witness the comfort children receive in the arms of their parents. Sick and dying children are comforted by their ultimate trust in their parents—the

trust that their parents are doing, and will do, everything they can to help that child. We need to ask ourselves: Are we as parents living up to that trust? Is our neglect of our children’s environment betraying that unconditional trust?

The cover image indicates that the world is a gift to children. The world painted by Sareen is in harmony and sustains humans as well as other species. The world still does have so many wonderful things. It is for our children that we must leave a healthy, sustaining world. Surely, we can all agree on that.

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THE ARTIST

The cover art for this issue was produced by Sareen, student health activist, during a competition organized by HRIDAY-SHAN, New Delhi, India, and sponsored by WHO and the Healthy Environments for Children Alliance (HECA) for World Health Day 2003. Thousands of youth around the world have learned about healthy environments for children through producing artwork on the theme. Drawing and painting competitions on environmental threats to children’s health have been organized in many WHO Member States. National ministries, WHO regional or country offices, academic institutions, NGOs, community groups, and others have taken the lead in this regard. These competitions serve to encourage children to reflect on and document environmental threats in their homes, schools, and communities. The artwork—often shown at awards ceremonies and community gatherings, or publicized via communication tools like calendars and booklets—has also proved to be an effective means of increasing awareness among adults.

HRIDAY (Health-Related Information Dissemination Amongst Youth) and SHAN (Student Health Action Network) are two non-governmental development organizations involved in providing health-related awareness activities for youth. Environment has been an important theme of their health-promotion package. HRIDAY-SHAN programs are currently functional in 206 schools of Delhi (83 private schools and 123 government schools); see: <http://www.hriday-shan.org>. Conscious of the urgent need for programs that enhance awareness and adoption of

practices to preserve, protect, and promote healthy environments for children, they developed a special program on environmental threats to children's health. Encouraging children to make posters on the theme was part of the program's approach. Sareen's artwork was one of the posters produced in conjunction with HRIDAY-SHAN and WHO for World Health Day 2003.

Cover Art

"*Untitled*" by Sareen, student health activist, India. Watercolor on paper.

On the Cover: "*Untitled*" by Sareen, student health activist, during a competition organized by HRIDAY-SHAN, New Delhi, India, and sponsored by WHO and the Healthy Environments for Children Alliance (HECA) for World Health Day 2003. See the "Cover Essay: Children and EcoHealth" by John Howard, *EcoHealth* 3:215–217, 2006. The cover art for this issue was sponsored by and reproduced with permission of the Healthy Environments for Children Alliance (HECA); see: <http://www.who.int/heca/en/>.

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