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Environmental Education Is Broken. Now What?

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[7 million](#) (<http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/popclockworld.html>). That's roughly how many people are added to our planet's population each month. Such a staggering growth rate shines a bright light on resources like food, water, and energy. Will there be enough to go around? Our weekly series, *The Sustainables*, profiles the folks doing their part to ensure that there is.



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If only it were so easy. (Photo: David Gould / Getty Images)

In the 41 years since the first Earth Day, the United States has passed a bevy of [life-saving environmental laws](#) ([/news/2010/07/01/-5-most-impactful-pieces-of-environmental-legislation-](#)), including the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act. 196 nations have ratified the Kyoto Protocol, dubbed “perhaps the single most successful international agreement to date,” by Kofi Anan, the former Secretary-General of the United Nations. And, just today, the United Kingdom announced a pledge to [halve](#) (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/may/17/uk-halve-carbon-emissions>) its carbon emissions by 2025.

Indeed, there's been a tangible rise in global eco-awareness: people know our oceans are overfished, that recycling is something they should be doing, and that planting a tree is a down payment on a child's future.

And yet in spite of this increased environmental knowledge, the planet is in worse shape than ever.

The problem, argue authors Daniel T. Blumstein and Charles Saylan, is that environmental education has failed to translate awareness into action.

This tenet is the launching point of their forthcoming book, [The Failure of Environmental Education \(And How We Can Fix It\)](#) (<http://www.ucpress.edu/book.php?isbn=9780520265394>), a passionate indictment of the green movement from two men who've devoted their personal and professional lives to protecting the planet.

Blumstein is chair of the department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology and a professor in the [Institute of the Environment and Sustainability](#) (<http://www.environment.ucla.edu/>) at UCLA. Saylan is executive director of the [Ocean Conservation Society](#) (<http://www.oceanconservation.org/>).

TakePart caught up with Blumstein and Saylan to discuss why eco-degradation far outpaces eco-literacy, and what can be done to right the ship.



41 years after the first Earth Day, environmental education lags far behind environmental degradation, argue authors Daniel Blumstein and Charles Saylan. (Photo: Hulton Archive / Getty Images)

TakePart: Before we dive into the failure of environmental education, is there something that you guys think we got right since the Earth Day 1970?

Daniel Blumstein: People's awareness about environmental issues is much greater. And people seem to genuinely like learning about nature and animals. For instance, I think that TV shows about animals and the environment are very popular.

Charles Saylan: I think maybe what we got right was the mechanism for creating awareness, to some extent.

TP: You guys argue that cutting 10% of personal consumption can be done virtually overnight—is this energy consumption or goods consumption?

DB: They're all related. If you cut goods consumption you cut energy consumption. If you conserve broadly, if you use less, then less is produced and less energy is used.

CS: I think that a 10% cutback in consumer consumption—assuming we had the collective will to do it—could be obtained almost immediately without significant changes to our lifestyles.

DB: Carpool. Less meat. Modify your thermostat. Put on a sweater. Take off some clothes. These kinds of things.

CS: Buy only products that limit packaging.

TP: What can consumers in 2011 learn from those who went through the Great Depression?

DB: A lot. I think that we have to focus on what really matters, which are personal relationships and family relationships. I think we have to focus on reducing and reusing and repurposing and sharing and working together. As much as 40% of our food that we grow is wasted along the production line, and simply reducing food waste is a huge way to reduce impact and save money.

I think the lesson from the Depression is that if you don't have money to spend you're not going to waste it, and you're going to be thrifty—in a positive sense, not a cheap sense.

TP: You guys have argued that recycling isn't economically feasible, and thereby not really sustainable. Can you talk about that?

DB: Certainly you're going to save more and use fewer resources if you don't put something into a recycling stream—if you re-purpose it, re-use it until it wears out. The thing that frustrates me is that it's really difficult to get things fixed these days in the U.S., particularly electronic products. Often, it costs more money to get something fixed than it does to go out and buy something new, and that really bothers me.

TP: What's the biggest failure in environmental education to date?

CS: While environmental education is likely responsible for the increased levels of public awareness, its biggest failure is that of not keeping pace with environmental degradation. Given that humanity (and biodiversity) is facing a potential time bomb, environmental education needs to rise to the challenge of changing both opinion and behavior if we are to have any hope of mitigating the effects of runaway consumption and our global addiction to fossil fuels.

TP: In the era of budget cuts, is environmental education in public schools doomed?

CS: One of the important things that we're trying to stress—in the book, anyway—is that in order for this to work you cannot depend exclusively on a top-down solution to this. That implementation of these ideas needs also to come from a community and a grassroots level. Hopefully, that will exert enough short-term political pressure on politicians so that politicians refund these kinds of programs and recognize the need.

DB: I think that education reform is something that many people are thinking about. We have framed environmental education in part as teaching people to be citizens. To be citizens you have to un-silo knowledge and thus we have to teach our students to think across disciplines. We can easily do so by integrating environmental issues throughout K-12 education, rather than isolating it in a separate 'activity' or 'class'.

TP: Some homes with solar panels store enough energy to the point where the energy companies are buying the power from consumer. Transposing this analogy—on a macro level—to climate change, do you think we'll get to a point where we're, realistically, a net-positive?

CS: I think that we have the capacity to do that—or we certainly have a healthy grasp on the technology that would allow us to do that. However, I think you could demonstrate pretty clearly that the international political will does not exist yet to undertake these changes

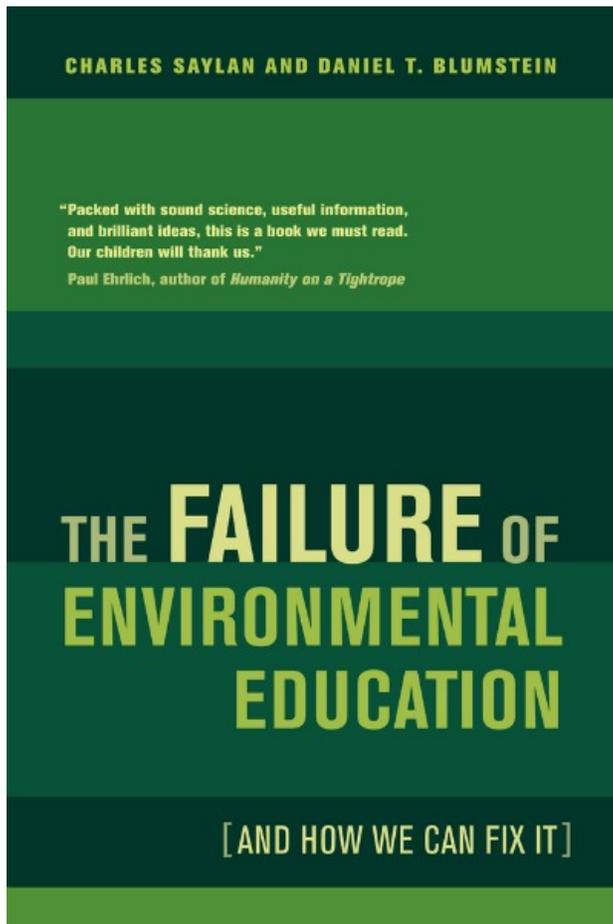
DB: ...I think that as long as we have so many people, that is going to be a real challenge. And that, really, it's about managing the decline rather than "reversing the trajectory."

TP: So the future is going to be about "doing less bad stuff"?

DB: Yeah.

CS: I think "less bad stuff" is accomplished by doing more good stuff.

TP: What's one thing someone can do for under \$5 or in less than five minutes to



If you read this book, your children will "thank you," says famed biologist Paul Ehrlich. (Photo: Daniel Blumstein and Charles Saylan)

effect this change?

DB: Walk, bicycle, or take a bus to work.

CS: My personal belief is that we're going need to do more than that. I think changing our future and changing what climate scientists predict will be our future, is going to require a significant effort on the part of everyone. I think a first step might be for one to sit for five minutes and think about how one will be a participant in effecting change, then live one's life accordingly.

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