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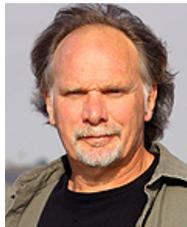
## Green Failure: What's Wrong With Environmental Education?

Marine conservationist Charles Saylan believes the U.S. educational system is failing to create responsible citizens who consider themselves stewards of the environment. To do that, he says in a [Yale Environment 360](#) interview, educators need to go beyond rhetoric and make environmental values a central part of a public education.

BY MICHELLE NIJHUIS

In a new book, Charles Saylan, co-founder and executive director of the California-based Ocean Conservation Society, and his co-author pose a key question: What can the U.S. educational system do to improve students' understanding of the environment and its importance in their lives?

The environment is often seen as a political issue and pushed to the margins of school curricula by administrators and parents, note Saylan and Daniel Blumstein, a biology professor at the University of California-Los Angeles, in [The Failure of Environmental Education \(And How We Can Fix It\)](#). But at its core, the authors contend, environmental responsibility is a broadly held, nonpartisan value, much like respect for the law. As such, they believe, it deserves a central place in public education, with lessons on the environment permeating every student's day. Environmentally active citizens, they say, should grasp everything from an understanding of tipping points to the "capacity to see intangible value in things: forests simply for the sake of the forest; the expanse of wilderness simply because it is alive, primal, and fiercely beautiful."



UCLA

Charles Saylan

In a [Yale Environment 360](#) interview with journalist Michelle Nijhuis, Saylan emphasized his conviction that raising awareness is only half the job of environmental education. Students, he said, should be encouraged to tackle environmental problems in their own communities and should learn how the political process works and how they can act at the local, state, and national levels to turn individual beliefs into policy.

Saylan also talked about the frustrations and rewards of his own experiences as an environmental educator and laid out his vision of what must be done to fundamentally overhaul environmental education. If environmental education is to be truly effective in creating responsible

citizens who will help stop human degradation of the environment, Saylan insists, it must go well beyond platitudes and the occasional class trip.

**Yale Environment 360:** You've dedicated your personal life to marine conservation. What were some of your early experiences with environmental education?

**Charles Saylan:** When I was growing up, there wasn't any formal environmental education per se — at that time, we didn't know we were messing things up as badly as we are. I grew up in California spending most of my time outdoors, either climbing or sailing. Nature was where I wanted to be — I felt quite at home in the wilderness — and as I grew older, I saw those areas where I'd grown up dwindling, and increasingly being encroached upon. It made me want to do something to protect those places.

**e360:** Was there a person or an experience that initially drew you into nature?

**Saylan:** Not really, but I was fortunate to grow up in a time when people had a different perception of their kids' safety. When my friends and I were 12 years old, my parents dropped us off in Yosemite and left us there for three weeks to walk the John Muir Trail. I can't imagine that happening these days. But it was a different time, and the world seemed a less dangerous place.

**e360:** Your book has a provocative title: *The Failure of Environmental Education*. How has it failed?

**Saylan:** When we talk about failure, we're being very pragmatic about it. We believe that environmental education has failed because it's not keeping pace with environmental degradation, with human impacts on the environment. I also think that it's failed to provoke action. We have this idea that environmental education should provide us with the tools we need to make informed decisions, but I don't believe we're making informed decisions as a society commensurate with the pace of our consumption of the environment, our destruction of the environment. So if one looks at environmental education from the standpoint of getting bang for the buck spent, so to speak — and we think that bang for the buck should be measured in tangible impacts such as reduction of greenhouse-gas emissions — it's just not happening.

**Environmental education has failed because it's not keeping pace with environmental degradation."**

**e360:** Was there a moment when you realized that environmental education was failing in this sense?

**Saylan:** At the [Ocean Conservation Society](#), we've done a lot of environmental outreach. And because we're located in an affluent area, in west Los Angeles, we work with a lot of private schools. We also work with the city of Santa Monica, which is kind of the poster child for sustainable municipalities. In our book, we talk a lot about public education and how the standards on which public education is based don't include environmental education. In private schools, especially these private schools, there's a heavy emphasis on environmental education, and it's a

significant and strong part of the curriculum. And we didn't see a lot of motivation in these kids. They knew the material and said what was expected of them, but we didn't really see a change in behavior or a willingness to give something up for the benefit of the environment. Environmental education, typically, is based on this idea that if we make people aware, they'll do the right thing. We were working with a highly aware community that wasn't doing the right thing. I started to question whether awareness translates to action at all.

**e360:** So what was missing?

**Saylan:** Well, a lot of things, I think. In the book, we say clearly that we don't have all the answers, that we don't know the exact steps required for change, especially because the problems are different in every location and venue. But I think the biggest thing that's lacking is relevance. I don't think that environmental education as it's currently taught directly affects the lives of the students we're teaching.

At the Ocean Conservation Society, we did some environmental presentations on marine conservation at inner city schools. I went to a school in east L.A. where you had to go through metal detectors to get in, where the playground was filled with trash. And I felt very hypocritical giving a presentation to these kids, most of whom had never seen the ocean. Why should they care? I don't think environmental education asks that often enough. So we initiated a cleanup program on the water. We partnered with a local kayak manufacturer and took these kids out on the water, which was engaging and exciting for them — most of them had never been on water, much less paddled in a kayak. We trained individual teachers and parents in the use of the equipment and then gave them open access — they could bring their students whenever they wanted. At the same time, we provided open access to other programs that offered hands-on experience — whale watching, marine-mammal rehabilitation — things that kids could get interested in and then take part in as much as they liked.

**The affluent kids are oversaturated — they can quote Aldo Leopold, but it's just academic to them.”**

**e360:** Did you see those kids engage?

**Saylan:** We had kids coming back weekly, not only because we were giving them a good time, but also because they were pulling trash out of the water, and they couldn't ignore the mountain of junk that was coming out. That was a real object lesson.

In that program we worked with a lot of different schools, both inner city and highly privileged schools. We saw a lot of growth in motivation in the students, but interestingly, while most of the inner city schools continued the program, the affluent schools, for the most part, abandoned it. The affluent kids are oversaturated — they can quote Aldo Leopold, they know this stuff, but it's just academic to them.

**e360:** Another reason given for the failure of environmental education is the politicization of environmentalism in general.

**Saylan:** Somewhere along the line, the environmental movement became

synonymous with the hippie counterculture — in the media's portrayal of it, and in some cases in environmentalists' portrayal of themselves. As our world became more polarized, and as professional organizations began to manufacture doubt about science in the public mind, I think that association was increasingly used to politicize and marginalize environmentalism and environmental protection. Nowadays, environmentalism is often seen as simply an encroachment on the free market. That's completely wrong — wrong in the sense that environmentalism is a responsibility of being alive, of our need to drink water and eat food. It's an individual and collective responsibility, whether we acknowledge it or like it or not.

**e360:** You say that the term “environmentalism” should be abandoned. What should it be called instead?

**Saylan:** Responsible citizenship.

**e360:** What are some of the first concrete steps that parents and teachers might take toward improving environmental education?

**Saylan:** It's easy to theorize — of course, the toughest thing is implementation. I think top-down reforms are necessary for change, but I'm not sure that we'll be able to develop and put them in place in time to mitigate environmental degradation. I do think that locally and individually, parents and teachers can help. I hear kids in grocery stores telling their parents not to buy this or that product because of its environmental impacts — and I think those lessons come from individual teachers, because that's not an institutional approach. We don't teach externalities.

**Students need to learn what moral systems are so that they understand what makes a good society.”**

**e360:** I think many classroom teachers would say that they're already overwhelmed by trying to keep kids in school, preparing them for standardized tests, and teaching them essential skills. How can they fit environmental education into an already crowded school day?

**Saylan:** Teachers are underpaid and undersupported, and they're asked to do a very difficult, even impossible job. But I know at least 20 teachers I've worked with in the past 10 years whose classes are more motivated than the average, and who are themselves more motivated. They find a way to teach the importance of social engagement, and to insert some relevance for their students into the material they're required to teach. I think we need to identify who those people are and support them as much as possible.

**e360:** How specifically have teachers managed to teach these values in the classroom?

**Saylan:** We've worked with Animo Leadership High School, which is a Los Angeles magnet school run by the teachers' union. Its curriculum is full of community action and engagement — the kids go out in the community and set up gardens, or help people save energy and money by insulating their houses. They pick their own projects and stay with them from inception to completion, over the course of several semesters if not

through their entire stay at the school. The kids are highly motivated, highly engaged in the community, and highly successful in the No Child Left Behind sense — the vast majority go to college. The teachers and administrators at that school are also unusually motivated — they don't let the system beat them down, which the system tends to do.

**e360:** You've emphasized that it's impossible to write a general prescription for reform. But if the LA Unified School District were to adopt your suggestions, what might a typical high schooler's day look like?

**Saylan:** Well, it might not look that different than it does today, but the content might change. I would hope that some part of it would be spent outside. I would hope that students would get involved in changing their schools — physically changing the buildings — to make them more sustainable and more appealing to them, places where they wanted to spend time. Again, I think educational projects that involved community action would be a good thing. School gardens have proven to be a good idea on a lot of different levels — they have very direct, practical teaching potential.

I also think that schools should restore some of the programs they've begun to give up, like literature, poetry, and aesthetics. I think students need to get beyond this intense focus we have now on economic performance, and learn why we need to perform economically, why our society is the way it is. They need to learn about moral systems — they shouldn't be taught a particular system of morality, but they need to learn what moral systems are so that they understand what makes a good society.

**e360:** Speaking broadly, beyond the three R's, what do you think every graduating senior in the United States should know?

**Saylan:** They need to be scientifically literate — it's hard for people to understand climate science if they're not scientifically literate. They need to read about and understand the political process, and understand why discourse and compromise is important to that. If the public education system were to provide those kinds of skills — John Dewey types of skills — we'd have a healthier society. We'd all be more likely to sacrifice for the greater good, which is what we'll need to do if we're going to mitigate some of the environmental problems that we have, and that are coming down the line.

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##### [Environmental Failure: Case for a New Green Politics](#)



The U.S. environmental movement is failing. What's needed, writes **James Gustave Speth**, is a new, inclusive green politics that challenges basic assumptions about consumerism and unlimited growth.

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**e360:** We've talked a lot about the problems with environmental education. Do you have a favorite moment from your own teaching experience where you saw environmental education really work in the way you envision it working?

**Saylan:** The Ocean Conservation Society had a mentorship program in which we helped groups of middle-school students develop

their own plans for environmental outreach or action. One group decided

to give a presentation to the Culver City council in support of a ban on plastic bags. We coached the students, but they approached the city council and did the presentation on their own, and they were phenomenal. It was truly democratic action.

**e360:** And did the bag ban pass?

**Saylan:** Nope. But they learned how to find the right audience for their ideas and to make their voices heard. And they learned that if they didn't succeed, they needed to go at it again.

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#### COMMENTS

Mr. Saylan has taken the odd approach that the right level of information and method of education can ensure the right choices all the time-- there are no examples of any form of education that works all the time for all people, especially when it comes to personal choice.

While our programs invest heavily in environmental education, we do not expect results greater than 40 years of anti-smoking education reducing smoking to a quarter of adults; risky sex despite high risk of HIV; 47% percent of adults in Detroit being illiterate and only 10% have ever even tried to become literate; or seat-belt wearing and speed limit abiding even though both are safer and one saves money.

Environmentalists can and do make their voices heard, every where and every day. It's a multi-billion dollar community. While it might be too much to have expected Mr. Saylan to look at where environmental educational standards are integrated, institutionalized, and heavily funded by the federal and state governments, Mr. Saylan in particular should be aware of the astounding progress of ocean conservation in the past fifteen years despite a billion added to the global human population, changing ocean chemistry, and increasing insults great and small from human activities. It is so easy to count the failures and make the news.

I only hope Mr. Saylan is planning to live his life as an educational exemplar, beginning of course with choosing to walk or bike only for his book tour.

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Posted by Angel Braestrup on 26 May 2011

I really appreciate my years of environmental education. It has not paid the bills, but I am richer for it. I think that the kind of changes that you are looking and measuring the success of environmental ed. is misplaced. To make a big difference in how we treat the earth and to reverse a trend of degradation we need to look at economics and maybe spirituality. Maybe it was environmental ed that makes me come to conclusion that capitalism is not sustainable, and there is no such thing as green capitalism. We are good at nature appreciation and nature understanding, but changing how we impact nature, that is not so well understood. Not everyone agrees that capitalism is the problem, so this is where we need to debate the questions and start educating ourselves as to where we go from here. That's the adult degree environmental ed course that needs to be taught now.

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Posted by Chris Pratt on 26 May 2011

I guess it is refreshing in 2011, for higher-educators noting something that my

colleagues and I have been professing since at least the early 1970's, the importance and negligence of school districts to embrace E.E. See anything written by Steve VanMatre, the late Dr. Bill Stapp, and others of that era. After thirty years participating in California and Alaska environmental education leadership, and higher education E.E., and ten years in informal natural resource education (NOAA and Alaska Fish and Game) I am back in the classroom. Is there time in the curriculum for separate courses in E.E.? NO! Can it be infused into the existing curriculum, YES! BUT, is it being done? NO.

Eight years of the Bush administration cut funds on EE and ignored anything related to human impacts on the environment if it had an effect on the economy, just as the Reagan administration before him.

Good luck--we are all in this together.

R. Foster, PhD.  
Homer, Alaska

Posted by Rick Foster, PhD on 27 May 2011

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