



RESEARCH ARTICLE

GREEN CULTURE: ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS AND PRACTICES
AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This research seeks to explore environmental awareness and practices among University students. In order to carry out the objectives of the research, qualitative methodology was employed and primary data were collected through semi-structured questionnaires. The researcher tries to find the answers to the problem whether undergraduates are aware of environmental issues and following habitual practices towards environmental sustainability. The research concluded that the awareness level on the environment and environmental issues of participants were moderate. Both female and male students are having environmental friendly habitual practices towards the environment. According to their native places (urban and rural), there are some differences in environmental awareness level. University students who live in urban areas have more awareness on waste disposal, motor vehicle pollution, water pollution, air pollution, deforestation and natural disasters but less awareness of biodiversity. Contrary, University students who live in rural areas have more awareness of deforestation and soil erosion.

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INTRODUCTION

There are many environmental issues and problems confronting in contemporary world. Some are local or regional in character while others have an impact on the global human population and involve both social relationships and interactions and on human, natural phenomena. In this sense, they are hybrid issues of society and the environment (Irwin, 2001). Man is a vital component of the environment, not separate from the environment. The interrelationship between people and their environment is called 'human ecology'. It is evidenced by environmentalist, Commoner (1971) stated that "Everything is connected to everything else". Human ecologists focus on how the physical surroundings shape people's lives and also on how people influence the environment. Even at the most fundamental level of life itself, it can be seen. As environmental degradation, issues and the impacts have increased tremendously, the concern and the discussion on the interaction between human beings and the environment has been emerged. The term 'environment' is a "concept which includes all aspects of the surroundings of humanity, affecting individuals and social groupings" (Gilpin, 1996). The 'environment' is all of those non-human, natural surroundings within which human beings exist. The environment is a system which provides natural surroundings

for the existence of organisms including humans and which is a prerequisite for their further evolution. Environmental awareness is defined as "an idea holding a general impression or consciousness about something without having to know much about it" (Roberta, 2009). It is learned that environment has to be protected and conserved so to make future life possible. According to Selvam and Abdul Nazar, public education, awareness and responsibilities are the key factors in any attempt to maintain a proper balance and ensure sustainable development. They recognized the potentials of environmental education as an effective instrument in preventing environmental crises and as an essential element of sustainable development (2011). Environmental education, a critical and central aspect of sustainable development, is aimed at "producing a citizenry that is knowledgeable concerning the biophysical environment and its associated problems, aware of how to help solve the problems, and motivated to work toward their solutions" (Stapp, 1969). This definition was first presented by Dr. William Stapp in 1969. International Conference on Environmental Education (ICEE) organized by United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture (UNESCO) and United Nations Environment Protection (UNEP) at Tbilisi in 1977 were the most significant landmarks in environmental education. The environmental, educational programs can be divided as formal and informal educational programs. School education, seminars, conferences, workshops, and lectures, etc. are formal education while mass media are the means of informal education on the

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environment. According to United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture the goal of environmental education is “to develop a world population that is aware of, and concerned about, the environment and its associated problems, and which has the knowledge, skills, attitudes, motivations, and commitment to work individually and collectively toward solutions of current problems and the prevention of new problems” (UNESCO, 1976). The aim of the research was to measure the level of environmental awareness and habitual practices towards environment among the undergraduate students with special reference to Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University in Sri Lanka. This examined according to the educational level, gender, and residence of the undergraduate students. The existing literature on the environmental awareness and habitual practices is rare in Sri Lankan context. Thus, the study attempted to fill the information gap while considering the concern of the university students on environmental awareness and habitual practices.

Environmental Issues and Environmental Protection in Sri Lanka

Asia Development Bank pointed out that polluted and degraded the environment is the result of the rapid economic development and population growth in Asia. The threats to human health also have been increased gradually. Its assessment of Asia Development Bank mentioned as, “Asia’s environment has become so polluted and degraded that it poses a threat not just to the quality of lives of its people, but also to its economic prospects. Out of the world’s 15 most polluted cities, 13 cities are in Asia as those are the most populous countries”. Sri Lanka is one of the smallest Islands, 65,610 km² in area, but biologically diverse country in Asia. It is situated close to the Southeast corner of the peninsula of India. Sri Lanka has a population at almost 20 million. It has varied the climate and topographical conditions which brings a rich species diversity. Thus, it is recognized by the environment activist group Conservation International (CI) as a ‘Biodiversity hotspot’ of global and national importance. Biodiversity includes species diversity, genetic diversity, and ecosystem diversity. The significant feature of Sri Lanka’s biodiversity is the remarkable high proportion of endemic species among its flora and fauna: 23% of the flowering plants and 16% of the mammals in the Island are endemic. The major threat to biodiversity in Sri Lanka is the ever-increasing demand for land for human habitation and related developmental activities (First National Report on the Implementation of Article 6 of the Convention on Biological Diversity, Sri Lanka). The limited commitment and dedication from both public and state is the other reason for environmental threats in recent years. The main reason is the low level of knowledge of the environment and environment conservation. The environment of Sri Lanka also heavily polluted and degraded. The Sri Lanka Environmental National Report has identified a number of critical environmental problems and issues.

The following were the major environmental problems and issues them;

- Deforestation caused by shifting cultivation, timber exploitation, fuel wood collection, encroachment of agriculture on forests

- Coastal erosion, and resulting damage to beaches, coastal conservation and communities
- Soil erosion, and loss of agricultural productivity of the land
- Pollution of water bodies, coastal Eco-systems and beaches caused by the discharge of industrial pollutants and raw sewage
- The sea level rise, landslides floods and other natural disasters, the victims of which are predominantly from the poorest segments of society, who are compelled to take the risk of occupying vulnerable areas
- Siltation of reservoirs built for irrigation and/or hydropower generation purposes
- Poor natural resource management and land use patterns, resulting in the marginalization of lands, loss of productivity and depletion of non-renewable resources
- Atmospheric pollution from vehicle emissions and industries
- Urban expansion without concomitant infrastructural growth, resulting in the proliferation of slums and shanties, and many other urban problems

Since 1980s, legal, policy and institutional interventions aimed at addressing environmental issues in Sri Lanka. Although in 1992, Sri Lanka National Environmental Action Plans formulated, it was not successful. Thus, the National Environmental Policy formulated. In the Constitution of Sri Lanka, it is mentioned that “the duty of every person in Sri Lanka is to protect nature and conserve its riches”. The objective of the National Environmental Policy is to “ensure sound environmental management within a framework of sustainable development in Sri Lanka”. This Policy is supported by many other policies and strategies developed for other sectors. It emphasizes that caring for the environment is the responsibility of any institution, government or non-government, and of any individual that it uses. There are a number of environmental policies in Sri Lanka (Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources of Sri Lanka);

- National Forestry Policy – 1995
- National Air Quality Management Policy – 2000
- National Environment Policy – 2003
- National Watershed Management Policy – 2004
- Cleaner Production Policy – 2004
- National Biosafety Policy – 2005
- National Policy on Wetlands – 2005
- National Policy on Sand as a Resource for the Construction Industry – 2006
- National Policy on Elephant Conservation – 2006
- National Policy on Solid Waste Management – 2007

Environmental protection in Sri Lanka is more or less guaranteed by law and there are certain agencies entrusted with this task, e.g. the Ministry of Environment, the Department of Wildlife Protection, the Department of Coast Conservation, the Central Environmental Authority and so on. Even local authorities such as Provincial Councils, Municipal Councils, and Local government are involved in environmental protection, particularly in the area of waste disposal. Non-Governmental Organizations in Sri Lanka also commit to conservation of environment and natural resources such as Asian Environmental Protection Organization (AEPO), Cultural & Environment Society (CES), Environment &

Natural Resources Development Centre (ENRDC), Green Movement of Sri Lanka (GMSL), Sri Lanka Environment Conservators (SLECO), Sri Lanka Environmental Journalists Forum (SLEJF) etc.

Objectives of the study

1. To find out the level of environmental awareness towards the environment among the female and male university students.
2. To find out the habitual practices towards the environment among the female and male university students.
3. To find out the significant differences of university students on the basis of their native places (Rural and Native) on the environmental awareness.
4. To find out the significant differences of university students on the basis of their native places (Rural and Native) on the habitual practices.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study method was conducted using survey method which is a way of gaining knowledge by means of direct and indirect observations or experiences. The qualitative research approach was performed to conduct the study. The questionnaire consisted of two parts; part one consists of personal information of respondents and part two included the statements. The secondary data collected from library reference books, journals, newspaper articles, magazine articles, and browsing the Internet. Sixty undergraduates of Trincomalee Campus of Sri Lanka randomly selected to collect data from the respondents and the researcher maintained the equal composition of male and female undergraduates. The students were identified separately either rural or urban and selected randomly. The collected data were analysed qualitatively.

Literature Review

The environment is the 'surroundings' or the 'ecosystem'. 'Environner', the French word, is meant 'to encircle or surrounds' (Cunningham, Cunningham & Saigo, 2005). Willam P. Cunningham, Mary Ann Cunningham and Barbara Saigo, the authors of the book named 'Environmental science; A global concern' defined environment as "the circumstances or conditions that surround an organism or group of organisms", or "the complex of social or cultural conditions that affect an individual or community". Most of the people see the environment as air, land, water, plants and animals, while the scientists see the environment as consisting of both living organisms and their physical surroundings such as water, soil and air (Akiyode, 2004). According to Dictionary of Psychology (2001), the environment is "the external surroundings within which an organism lives or any external factors that affect the organism's development or behaviour, as distinct from intrinsic genetic factors...". The systematic study of the environment is called environmental science which is 'relatively interdisciplinary new field and mission-oriented' (Cunningham, Cunningham & Saigo, 2005). According to Aminrad *et al.* (2010) environmental awareness was overall moderate while environmental attitude was high. The study also found that there was no significant difference observed between sex groups while environmental awareness results indicated that there was a significant difference among

different levels of education. This trend was in contrast with observation for environmental attitude status. The age groups analysis results revealed a significant difference in environmental awareness and attitude. It was also found that the media positively affected the level of environmental awareness and attitude among students. The study concluded that increase in age and level of education would improve the level of awareness and attitude regarding environmental issues.

According to Abbas & Singhm (2012) environmental awareness implies not only being knowledgeable about the environment but also being acquainted with sets of values, attitudes and skills for addressing environment-related problems. They found the level of environmental knowledge and positive attitudes towards the environment among the students is high, but there is a low-level participation in environmental protection activities. This implies that other factors than environmental knowledge and awareness may be the stimulants to induce students' active participation in environmental protection and improvement activities.

Nikhat and Shafeeq (2014) doing a research on 'Environmental Awareness among Professional and Non-Professional Undergraduate Students of Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh' revealed that the students belonging to professional courses are more aware than students from non-professional courses. Moreover, females are found more aware and worried about the environmental problems. They have shown that there is an influence of gender, religion and academic streams on the level of students' environmental awareness.

Hassan, Rahman & Abdullah revealed that university students had the knowledge, awareness and attitudes towards environment at a high level but the practices of the environment were at a moderate level. Based on gender, there were no significant differences in terms of knowledge, awareness and practices towards the environment. However, there were significant differences in terms of attitudes which female students had the higher attitude to the environment as compared to male students. In terms of disciplines, there was a significant difference in knowledge by students from professional discipline. They had the lowest level of knowledge as compared to students from other disciplines. The Pure Science students had the highest level of awareness as compared to students from other disciplines. In terms of attitudes and practices, there was no significant difference between students from different disciplines of study. There was a significant relationship between knowledge, awareness and attitudes to the practices of the environment.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Results revealed that the both male and female were aware of the environment and current environmental issues in Sri Lanka. It is revealed that the majority of university students are aware of deforestation. Among all participants, female students are more aware of water pollution and deforestation and male students are having a similar awareness of deforestation, development and environment and natural disasters. Both male and female students have less awareness of biodiversity. Majority of respondents both male and female have stated that they are practising some habitual practices such as switching off running water taps at home and in the campus premises, using environment-friendly bags, separate garbage accordingly etc. But female students never do recycle their used papers and

male students also do rarely. Therefore, it is shown that both female and male students are actively participating to protect the environment. Awareness level, according to their native places (urban and rural) shows that university students who live in urban areas have more awareness on waste disposal, motor vehicle pollution, water pollution, air pollution and natural disasters. Contrary, along with the above environmental issues students who live in rural areas have more awareness of deforestation and soil erosion. Students who live in urban areas have less awareness on biodiversity. Students who live in rural areas have less awareness of food contamination by growth hormones and antibiotics. When concerning on the habitual practices of students based on their native places (urban and rural) majority of urban students are practising to separate garbage accordingly, throwing their waste paper into dustbins, picking litter whenever they find them. Those practices have thrived by the students who live in rural areas. Besides those practices, they are practising to switch off running water taps at home and in the campus premises. Generally, both urban and rural student have less practised on recycling their used papers.

Furthermore, the study found female students personally more concern about air pollution and water pollution. Male students are more concerned about both deforestation and air pollution. Majority of female students stated that the more important environmental issues prevailing in Sri Lanka are global warming, pollution of the environment and deforestation. Male students have pointed out that more important issues prevailing in Sri Lanka are environmental pollution as a result of the unavailability of a proper system to garbage disposal and deforestation. Majority of students are pointing out deforestation is the most prominent environmental issue in Sri Lanka. Among the respondents, they stated that the majority of them are getting aware of environmental issues through the mass media. A considerable amount of respondents stated they are getting aware of environmental issues through their real experience and through the social media. The students have given suggestions to solve the environmental issues in Sri Lanka. The result explicates majority of students have suggested making people aware as same as they are pointing out Sri Lanka needs to be implemented the laws and policies which are functioning independently without political influences. They suggested that people should have a proper garbage disposal system within the country. Furthermore, they emphasized the need for proper punishment system in Sri Lanka.

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