

Smart By Nature

Written by Michael Stone, Center for Ecoliteracy

Foreword by Daniel Goleman

Edited by Daniel Imhoff, Emmett Hopkins, and Janet Reed Blake

Designed by Roberto Carra and Timothy Rice

Order the Book

As we recognize the sobering implications of global environmental and social justice threats, people are looking for smart new answers. *Smart by Nature: Schooling for Sustainability* offers the best hope of all by explaining what sustainable living really means, how to teach it, and why young people with this knowledge will lead us to a safer, more fair, and prosperous future.

— Kevin Cole, Vice President
Education and Training for the
National Wildlife Federation

Foreword

By Daniel Goleman

Schooling for sustainability, as described in *Smart by Nature*, has never been more important. We need to cultivate thinking that comprehends complex systems, perspectives that widen empathy and nurture mindfulness, better techniques for gathering and sharing information, and new modes of cooperation. The only long-term strategy that makes sense in our changing world is education.

Knowing how things and nature work includes recognizing and understanding the countless ways man-made systems interact with natural ones, what I call “ecological intelligence.” Ways of thinking that in the ancient past guided our innate ecological intelligence were well suited to the harsh realities of prehistory. But ensuing centuries have blunted the survival skills of the billions who live with modern technologies, a globalized economy, and complex webs of relationship.

Our brains are finely tuned for hyper vigilance against the dangers of a world we no longer inhabit, while today’s world presents us with abundant dangers we do not see, hear, taste, or smell—from such hazards as toxins in toys, to threats including global warming, to the impacts of the stuff we manufacture, grow, distribute, consume, and discard.

We need to get beyond the thinking that puts humankind outside nature. We live enmeshed in ecological systems. We need to discover and share among ourselves all the ways this intimate interconnectedness operates, to see the hidden patterns that connect human activity to the larger flow of nature, to understand our true impact on it, and to learn how to do better.

Ecological intelligence melds cognitive skills with empathy for all of life. Just as social and emotional intelligence build on the abilities to see from another’s perspective, feel with them, and show our concern, ecological intelligence extends this capacity to all natural systems.

Sensory clutter and cognitive fog challenge anyone trying to get shoppers to notice the impacts of their purchases or organizations or governments to recognize the consequences of their decisions. Mindfulness marks the mental shift from running on automatic, reflexively going through long-practiced routines, to an active awareness that allows new learning—and so new choice.

The challenges we face are too varied, too subtle, and too complicated for a single person to understand and overcome. A collective, distributed intelligence spreads awareness, whether among friends or family, within schools or companies, or through an entire culture. Such shared intelligence grows through the contributions of individuals who advance and spread that understanding. And so we need to educate scouts, explorers who alert us to ecological truths.

Reducing unsustainability, finally, is just the first step. We need to inspire our students to go beyond merely lessening harmful impacts to pursuing true sustainability—flourishing levels of health, vitality, and resilience that allow both humans and earth’s ecosystems to thrive. When we do, educating students in the competencies of sustainable living will change the world.

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