EPILOGUE

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The sustainability educator and consultant Hunter Lovins once told me that “if you look at what’s driving unsustainability, it is largely, I think, the absence of [...] conversations across values structures” (interview 6 August 2008). The cases and examples collected here are drawn from educators and professionals from a host of different disciplines, and from different sizes and types of institutions. Those who have authored these chapters are thus beholden to different communities of accountability with different sets of values. Finding convergences among those values requires first that we are explicit about them and, of equal importance, that we can facilitate conversations about the usually implicit values that our educational institutions endorse through business-as-usual discipline-based educational arrangements.

Conversations exposing these institutional values and the types of unsustainable leaders and communities they generate have begun, as the chapters collected here illustrate. Colleges and universities, professional schools, and in some cases broader disciplinary associations have begun to attend to the importance of place-based and problem-based learning. Such approaches throw the focus onto the multi-scalar relationships between individuals, the built environment, and the rest of their habitats, creating a learning environment that is more attuned to its ecological impacts.

All education is ultimately environmental education, as David Orr rightly noted. But the sort of picture that most students are getting regarding “the environment” and their relationship to it does not facilitate the development of the skill sets that will be needed to provide complex and multi-scaled solutions to the variety of interlinked social–ecological–economic issues that face us today. As Edward Abbey once put it, a formal education can be broadening, “but more often merely flattens.” Most of us have devolved; we have lost the ability to
make distinctions about categories of plants and animals that quite literally pro-
vided the foundation for our evolution into the dominant animal on the planet.
Studies by evolutionary psychologists and cognitive anthropologists have noted
significant differences in the ability to form folk categorizations among those
who live in industrialized locales, and some politically marginalized indigenous
groups who depend on their habitats for subsistence (Atran and Medin 2008).
The nature deficit disorder that is symptomatic of this devolution was perhaps
first noted nearly 40 years ago in the work of the human ecologist Paul Shepard
(1973, 1982, 1986; see also Louv 2005), but his point remains crucially important
today: the human genome was formed in the late Pleistocene, and we are now
decimating the species with which we co-evolved and which allowed us to flour-
ish. The biologist E.O. Wilson, drawing on the psychologist Erich Fromm, called
this affinity of living things for other life “biophilia” – and it is eroding. For Orr,
without profound experiences with nature in childhood, human survival is in
question: “We will not enter this new kingdom of sustainability until we allow
our children the kind of childhood in which biophilia can put down roots”
(quoted in Northwest Earth Institute 2001: VI-12).¹

I would only add that sustainability also depends on encouraging such “root
development” among adolescents and young adults.

Providing the proper growth medium and climate for student flourishing is a
difficult task, and it is becoming increasingly clear that it will require transfor-
tional educational institutions and a radical revisioning of the purpose and scope
of education, as Redman and Carp have suggested in their contributions to this
volume. The approaches detailed here offer a wide variety of perspectives,
approaches, and goals, and even different definitions or understandings of sustain-
ability. And they are all valuable. Together they represent something like an
“ecology” of the social movement toward education for sustainability – multiple
individuals, populations, and communities working at different scales to integrate
new forms of learning into our institutions. It is a task that could take generations
to complete, and yet by some accounts, the biophysical deterioration of earth
systems demands that it happen much more quickly than that. Opportunities
abound, as do obstacles. It is the ways in which we navigate these obstacles,
solving for patterns (not just for specific problems), and including currently mar-
ginalized constituencies in decision-making (not just providing expert–based
solutions), that will determine the sustainability of our educational systems, and
ultimately our intertwined political, social, economic, and ecological systems.
This is the challenge set before us. Let us hope, for posterity’s sake, that we are
up to it.

¹ The selection was drawn from Orr’s “The Coming Biophilia Revolution” in his book
Earth in Mind (1994).
References