

Chapter 13

El Salvador's National Environmental Education Strategy

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When GreenCOM was invited to El Salvador in 1994, the country had no environmental education in the schools, virtually no environmental information in the media, and no government agency charged with the environment. The situation was urgent in this small, war-torn country with a heavily damaged environment and a rapidly expanding population.

In what became one of the most comprehensive and ambitious programs, GreenCOM was brought in to promote environmental awareness and management throughout the nation. We undertook a five-year, multi-million dollar campaign, at the end of which, El Salvador possessed:

- ◆ A national environmental education (EE) strategy
- ◆ EE as a major theme of K–12 schooling
- ◆ Environmental studies at the university level
- ◆ An active environmental press.

In just a few years, environmental education became a transformational force in the schools, politics, media, and lives of El Salvador. How we helped the citizens of El Salvador achieve this so quickly is the subject of this chapter.

First, some thoughts on our general approach. Prior to the GreenCOM El Salvador project, a number of environmental NGOs were working in the country. But their efforts were mostly ineffective since they took one of two tacks, both of which failed in the El Salvadoran context. One tack was to protest harmful policies and development, but since the protesting groups lacked any real clout, they were largely ignored. The second approach was preservationist—these groups tried to keep natural areas intact and limit development. But since El Salvador is a small, overpopulated

country, pitting preservation against development is futile. The power elite dismissed these environmentalists as out-of-touch hippies. In the middle—between preservationists and developers—lay public opinion. Since the public was basically uninformed, people chose sides based on emotion.

GreenCOM decided to take a third approach: one of proposing solutions. In fact, I see environmental education as a matter of offering solutions. This was harder than fighting or protesting, but ultimately it worked.

For instance, we proposed linking development with environmental improvement. Let's say you need to build houses and you also need to let the aquifers recharge. How can you put together a housing plan that also allows for the recharge of local aquifers? Asking ourselves and the residents to think through such challenges proved to be the most useful way we could proceed.

In 1994, GreenCOM and the Executive Secretariat of the Environment (SEMA) formulated a national environmental education strategy. We knew it would need to be:

- ◆ **Comprehensive**, covering all educational fields and communication channels in the country
- ◆ **Integrated**, so that educational and media efforts would be coordinated to produce synergy, and
- ◆ **Participatory**, involving people from all walks of life in both planning and implementation.

Our strategy focused on three fundamental areas:

- ◆ **Formal education**—the school and university system. Activities here have included curriculum development, teacher training, develop-

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ment of student materials, and developing university degree programs.

- ◆ **Nonformal education**—non-degree educational forums. Activities include working with literacy and adult education, agriculture and extension programs, park interpreters, museum exhibits, churches, professional organizations and unions, and other associations.
- ◆ **Informal education**—the mass media.

Clearly, working in these three areas at once produces synergistic effects as individuals receive environmental messages through more than one “channel.”

FORMAL EDUCATION

Rarely does the opportunity arise to build a national environmental education system from the ground up. But because of El Salvador’s pressing needs, the country was already committed to fundamental educational reform when GreenCOM arrived on the scene. We took this opportunity to infuse environmental education throughout the curriculum. GreenCOM used a three-pronged strategy:

- ◆ Making the environment, along with science and health, one of eight central themes for education
- ◆ Preparing EE materials to teach major environmental issues through standard subjects like Spanish and math
- ◆ Training teachers: the project trained some 5,000 teachers, including a corps of Ministry of Education trainers, and the training will continue.

In cooperation with the Ministry of Education, GreenCOM developed three environmental education guides—one each for grades K–2, 3–5, and 6–8. These guides include dozens of lessons and explain how to incorporate the lessons into the standard subjects.

Rather than being transposed from another setting, the guides are a completely new curriculum specific to El Salvador. An outside consultant assisted with the first two; the third was developed with in-country expertise. The Ministry of Educa-

tion paid for printing. The first printing of each guide was 83,000; nearly every teacher in the country now has a copy.

Institutionalizing the Reforms

It is not easy to modify a formal education curriculum. Ministries of Education are often large, well financed, bureaucratic, and slow to make decisions. However, a national education reform movement, common in many countries in the late 1990s, shakes up the status quo and can provide an opportunity for introduction of environmental themes. Without an overall curriculum revision, bringing environmental education into the curriculum can be a slow and difficult process that should begin with the most closely related subjects, such as the natural sciences and health. After teachers in these subject areas accept EE, teachers of other subjects may be trained about its importance.

In El Salvador, to assure that environmental themes are adequately considered in the national formal education system, a unit responsible for environmental education was established in the Ministry of Education. The unit was an interdisciplinary group comprised of scientists and specialists in education and curriculum design. This unit had direct contact with the Ministry of the Environment.

GreenCOM worked with the Ministry of Education to create and train an environmental education unit within the Office of Curriculum Design. The Ministry selected the specialists for the unit: two biologists, both specializing in education and curriculum development, and short-term national and international consultants for executing specific projects such as the production of teacher’s guides and teacher training activities.

Introducing Environmental Themes into the Curricula

Two considerations are crucial in introducing Environmental Education into a school curriculum: it must be integrated throughout the curriculum and it must focus on problem-solving.

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We followed two guidelines in introducing environmental themes to schools. First these themes must be integrated throughout the curricula, not added as a separate course. Second, good environmental education goes beyond learning facts about nature to understanding how to solve practical environmental problems.

Integrating Throughout the Curriculum

Environment can, and should be, associated with all subjects of the curriculum. For example, a physical education class can explore air quality and the effects of environmental contamination on the performance of the athletes; a geometry class can study the angles of a slope that is subject to severe soil erosion resulting from intensive agriculture. By this means, we acknowledge that environment subject matter is not limited to a few pages or lessons in a book but that it integrates all school learning.

Have a Practical and Problem-solving Focus

Specialists in the area of formal education may think that environmental education is limited to the study of ecology or to a factual understanding of nature. It is necessary to convince them that students who are perfectly capable of recognizing flora and fauna, but do not see beyond their enumeration, will not be motivated to act. If environmental knowledge is developed without creating positive values about the importance of wise conservation, this knowledge could be used to exploit nature even further. On the other hand, if students develop only an emotional sentimentality towards nature without a practical focus on its rational and sustainable management, this sentimentality could be applied merely to a preservationist position without thinking through practical solutions.

Teacher Training

The Ministry produced a series of beautiful color textbooks for “Science, Health, and Environment” but this led to two challenges. First, teachers could not use the texts effectively since they were not aware of environmental issues nor trained to teach

with interactive projects. Second, adding “environment” to science and health reduced its potential to be an integrative force in the schools.

GreenCOM worked with the Ministry to develop a series of three teacher guides that provide concrete teaching activities, background information, and involve all teachers in environmental exercises. A training program was designed to accompany the distribution of the guides.

Teacher training should begin with basic information about the environmental situation of the world in general and their nation in particular as well as the consequences of environmental problems on the economy, personal health, and quality of life. Teachers should be trained to analyze different environmental situations, applying the knowledge offered by different disciplines, searching for alternative solutions, whether political, legal, technological, or related to changes in personal behavior. Training should promote developing these analytical, problem-solving skills in the students. This training should be supported with manuals for the teachers, applicable to appropriate grade levels, which give examples of how to relate subject content to environmental issues.

Production of Educational Materials for Classroom Use

Important teaching aids include booklets, videos, audio cassettes, illustrations, murals, games, models, etc. Teacher training includes developing abilities to use these resources and prepare similar materials.

GreenCOM produced several sets of educational materials to be used in schools:

- ◆ A radio series “Drop by Drop: The Adventures of Clarita the Water Droplet in her Trip Around the World,” offered, in ten 10-minute radio programs, information related to water and the water cycle. This information was conveyed in the form of the adventures of a water droplet that falls to earth as rain and travels the country through rivers until reaching the ocean.

...students can be involved in planning measures for solving specific environmental problems...

- ◆ Two video series with a total of 11 programs approximately 12 minutes each addressed environmental themes for different educational levels. The 5 programs from “Our Home, the Environment” explained about water, soils, forests, biodiversity, and urban environmental problems for secondary students. The 6 programs in the series, “The House of Water” address themes related to water for primary students.
- ◆ A series of booklets for schoolchildren. Each booklet was created in collaboration with an NGO, with the goal of reinforcing the capacity of these organizations in environmental education. Booklets were about birds, sea turtles, forests, air and water. To develop the booklets, a local consultant contracted by GreenCOM and the specialists from the NGO prepared the contents of the booklet. Subsequently, the GreenCOM team reviewed the contents and adapted them to the educational level of school children to which they are directed (6th to 9th grades). Later, the concept and presentation of the contents was developed with an illustrator, who created explanatory games, jokes, and pictures that made the lesson fun and simple. Thus, the booklets became something very different from textbooks but they complement their contents. Of the 10,000 copies of each booklet printed, 3,000 were submitted to the Ministry of Education to be sent to schools as part of didactic packages, another 3,000 were turned over to the NGO that participated in the development, 2,000 were given to the Executive Secretariat of the Environment to be distributed to NGOs and students that request them, and 1,000 were distributed directly by GreenCOM.

School Environmental Projects

Through community projects, students can apply knowledge acquired in the classroom as well as develop values and skills for improving environ-

mental conditions. Projects can be part of the social service activities required for graduation or can be conducted by a classroom working with their community.

Projects can focus on the development of positive individual environmental behaviors among students, such as planting trees in green spaces in downtown areas, separating and appropriately disposing of waste, conserving water and electric energy, maintaining nurseries and orchards, and making organic products for agriculture or horticulture. Projects can also focus on environmental assessments of the community: students can be involved in planning measures for solving specific environmental problems, such as solid waste disposal, pollution of river beds, deforestation of certain areas, or the erosion of agricultural soils in the community; or the execution of environmental education and promotion actions in support of solving identified environmental problems.

Environmental Education in Universities

Introducing environmental education into universities follows the same rules recommended for the other levels of education, including training of professors, a greening of courses where instructors express interest, and instituting a mandatory course on national environmental problems.

In El Salvador, several universities have undertaken this challenge. Each university planned an initial seminar on the environmental issues of El Salvador for all faculty that approaches environmental issues from geographic, geologic, historical, economic, social, political, and cultural perspectives. According to the interest expressed, the university can choose the next step from several alternatives. One option is to create seminars in various departments as electives. Another option is to design seminars about specific environmental topics for relevant degree programs: for example, a seminar on water quality for biology and chemical engineering departments, or on population dynamics and environment degradation for the sociology

and economics departments. A third option is to establish a seminar in environmental issues as a mandatory course for all students. Finally, some universities have begun to design environmental degree programs, such as the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeon Canas (UCA) which will soon offer a Masters degree in environment and natural resources.

NONFORMAL ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

Our objective in El Salvador was to enable technicians from public and private institutions to provide environmental education and help implement the national environmental education strategy. To do this we:

- ◆ Formed environmental education units in institutions related to the environment and education
- ◆ Trained technicians, mayors, legislators, and decision-makers about the environmental reality of the nation based on the diagnostic content of the National Environmental Education Strategy and updated studies
- ◆ Trained technicians in the design, formation, execution and evaluation of environmental projects
- ◆ Developed national parks as educational opportunities for visitors, by building interpretative trails, interpretation centers, and training guides and park guards as environmental educators

Nonformal environmental education encompasses the vast variety of educational opportunities, such as programs and exhibits at zoos, museums, nature centers, and parks; workforce training and education; civic and religious programs; extension activities; programs with leaders, decision-makers, and elected officials; and work with NGOs.

GreenCOM's approach to nonformal education was to encourage a massive training effort, focusing on technical staff of a variety of relevant institutions, interpretation training for parks, and agricultural extension workers.

Formation of Technical Staff of the Involved Institutions

At the beginning of its operations in El Salvador, GreenCOM created a multi-disciplinary team of technicians from different institutions related to the activities of the national environmental education strategy. These institutions were both public and non-governmental; representatives of public relations firms and the media were invited to participate.

A first task of this multi-disciplinary team was to learn the environmental issues in El Salvador through a series of seminars named "immersion workdays," in which the group analyzed environmental themes with the assistance of the best national experts in the subject. The team members later planted the seeds for creating environmental education units within their own institutions, which eventually multiplied the training to other groups of people.

Training of NGO Technical Staff

Training key staff in environmental NGOs or lead agencies ensures that the environmental education later offered to the public has a common focus and methodology. This training should stress the methodology for developing environmental projects in communities or neighborhoods, such as:

- ◆ Participatory techniques for environmental assessments of the community
- ◆ Design and planning of environmental education programs
- ◆ Design, testing and production of EE materials
- ◆ Monitoring and evaluation of EE programs

GreenCOM developed a training program for NGO technical staff about the steps to follow for the design, execution, and evaluation of EE projects. This training program was theoretical and practical; after each workshop the participants completed an assignment, the results of which were the basis for the development of the following workshop and the following activity. For example, the first workshop dealt with techniques for conducting a community assessment for an EE project. The participants were given two months to carry

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out their assessment. The results of these assessments were used in a second workshop where participants learned to plan an EE project. As part of the planning, participants discovered training needs in graphic and radio materials production. A final workshop at the end of the process provided tools for evaluating their EE projects.

As a result of the training process, a number of the NGOs submitted requests for project funding to the Initiatives Fund of the Americas for El Salvador. Many of these requests were approved and resulted in successful educational projects.

Training Environmental Interpretation Specialists in National Parks

National parks, both natural protected areas and urban recreational sites, could be environmental education opportunities for the citizens. The “natural” national parks can introduce visitors to the natural cycles and importance of the environment for human life. In this sense, they are educational opportunities about natural resources such as water, forests, biodiversity, and their sustainable management. Environmental interpretation is the discipline that creates different instruments like interpretive trails, visitor centers, exhibits, and slide shows. Training for interpreters should cover:

- ◆ Design of interpretive instruments: paths, display boards, exhibits, etc.
- ◆ Preparation of low-cost educational materials
- ◆ Techniques for giving educational talks
- ◆ Use of educational props and aids
- ◆ Human relations and treatment of visitors
- ◆ Management and guiding of groups
- ◆ First aid

Urban recreation parks, zoos, museums, and similar sites can also become opportunities for the public to learn about the urban environment, water systems, air concerns, and the proper disposal of wastes. In this sense, the placement of trash cans in these parks is an important ingredient to the practical education.

The national parks of El Salvador are co-managed by different government institutions (e.g., the

Salvadoran Institute of Tourism and the Office of National Parks and Wildlife of the Ministry of Agriculture) and NGOs (SalvaNatura, AMAR and Cedro). GreenCOM created an inter-institutional team of technical staff from each of these institutions and developed with this team an ambitious training program to improve EE and environmental interpretation techniques.

This group of environmental interpreters developed a training exercise for more than 120 park guides and guards in the nation’s principal national parks. In these parks, the team established different interpretive trails. They later played a fundamental role in the reform of the Museum of Natural History and in the creation of a new educational tool for children called “ecological carts,” mobile wagons that carry articles for interactive learning.

Currently, the team is assisting the National Secretary of the Family in incorporating an EE component in all the recreational parks that the institution is constructing.

INFORMAL ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

The majority of the people in El Salvador depend almost exclusively on the mass media to acquire information with which they form opinions and adopt behaviors. It is assumed that public awareness, boosted by the media, will create a greater demand for environmental legislation and for environmentally sound decision-making.

The news media says that it will address environmental themes if the public is interested. The public, on the other hand, is more likely to display interest in the environment if it has the opportunity to hear about the topic regularly, a task that only the communications media can do.

The fact that the environment has been a topic of global concern can help generate media coverage. The communications media will be interested in dealing with such a “fashionable” topic if they have reliable, valid, and relevant information. Thus, the first strategic guideline in increasing media coverage of the environment is to establish

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the channel by systematically informing journalists about relevant environmental topics.

Developing interest in environmental problems among the media in El Salvador was not an easy task. GreenCOM supported numerous meetings with the owners and managers of the different media, selling the idea that environmental topics were inescapable and that the communications media had the opportunity to get ahead by anticipating the interests of their readers, radio listeners, and television viewers. Finally, some media (including the two most important newspapers of the country) assigned journalists to cover the environment. GreenCOM offered to give these reporters all the assistance necessary to do this work well.

In 1994, the First National Environmental Journalism Encounter Conference attracted 45 journalists. Some prepared commentaries on the management of solid waste, which was viewed by the population of the capital city as a serious problem. These first reports were followed by other negative aspects of environmental problems. The reporters seemed to be discovering facts that previously passed unperceived, such as the dangerous pollution of the river passing through the capital or the heaps of trash that were mounting on many of its banks. Soon the news media were competing to address topics they saw affecting the health and well being of the population. The interest of the population generated a demand for more information, fed by the NGOs, as reliable sources of information about these topics. By the Third National Environmental Journalism Encounter, attended by approximately 150 people, the coverage of environmental topics was reaching 60 to 70 reports per month, with even some editorials on environmental topics.

Inform Communications Media about Environmental Themes for Stories

The institution responsible for the national EE strategy should take on the responsibility of providing environmental information to the media or

serving as a link between the media and specialized sources of information. Trained technical staff may be able to cover this role of specialized sources to be consulted and interviewed by the different media.

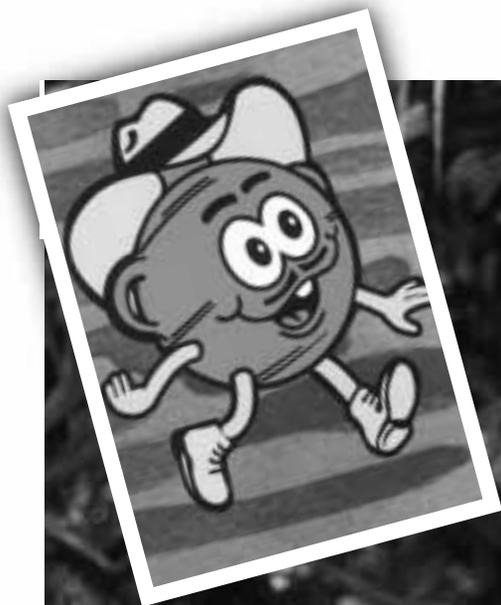
Some news organizations consider environmentalists to be influenced by the inheritance of the 'hippy' era and its romantic interest in nature. Others identify concern about the environment with political accusation. Others, especially those interested in development, believe that concern for the environment is at odds with the need for countries to develop economically, sacrificing environmental quality. Relating environmental themes to economic and health issues often attracts attention since they are already important issues.

Journalists depend on decisions from their editors on what and what not to publish. Therefore, gaining media coverage is also the product of a series of visits to the managers and chiefs of information to discuss the importance that environmental themes have in the development of the country and the quality of life of its inhabitants. One technique is holding breakfast conferences involving decision-makers from the media and environmental specialists.

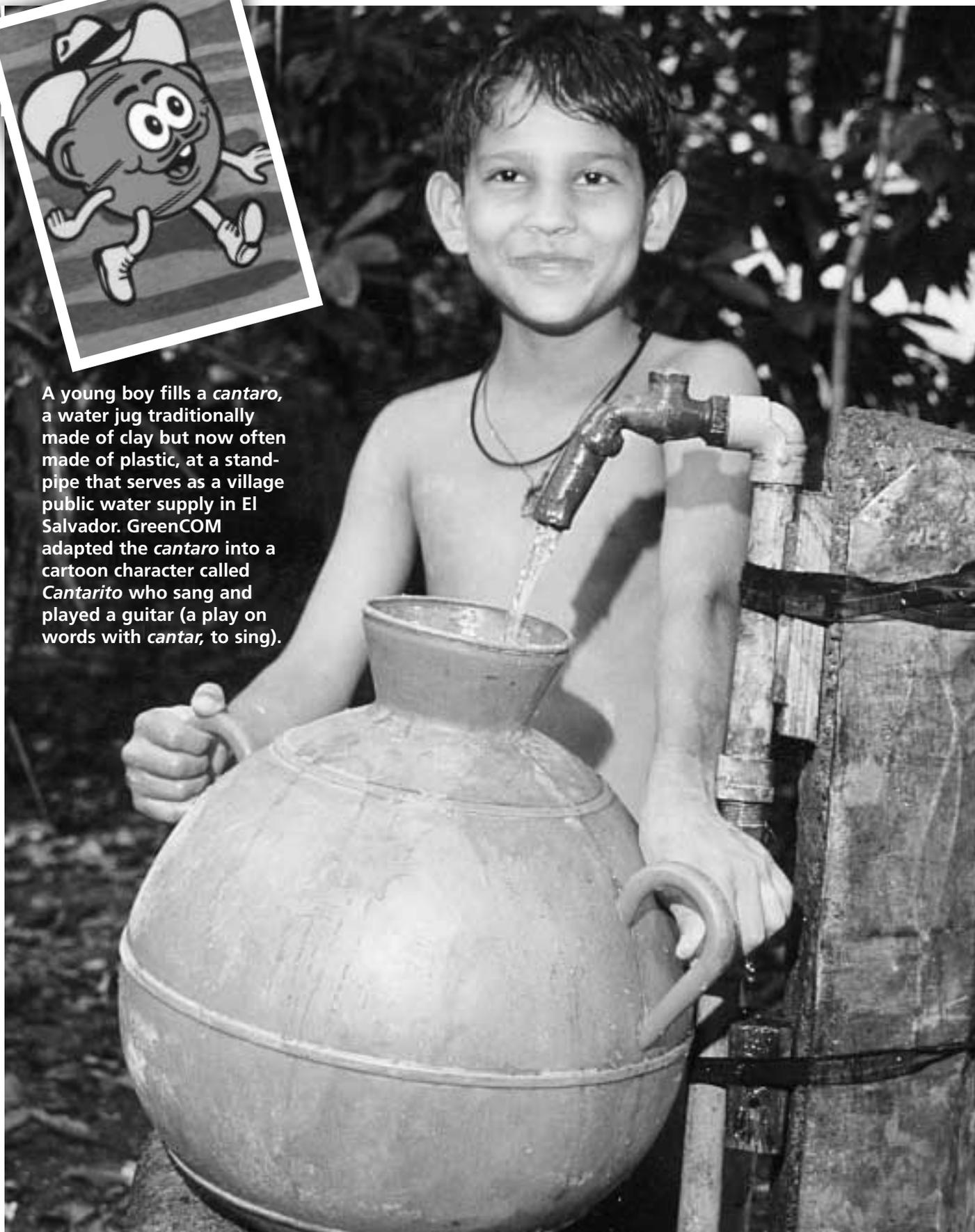
Background conferences to analyze specific environmental themes with recognized experts could help provide the news media with environmental information that may turn up in a later story. Environmental institutions should regularly send the news media press releases on their opinions and activities.

Interested journalists will begin to look for further information. It is important to identify these interested professionals and concentrate on them when sending information and invitations to conferences. These first interested journalists should be exposed to projects developed by NGOs and to environmental problems (such as heavily polluted rivers, areas of high erosion, etc.) with guided field trips led by technical staff.

During 1996 and 1997, the principal newspapers in El Salvador published several supplements dedicated to the environment. These supplements were



A young boy fills a *cantaro*, a water jug traditionally made of clay but now often made of plastic, at a stand-pipe that serves as a village public water supply in El Salvador. GreenCOM adapted the *cantaro* into a cartoon character called *Cantarito* who sang and played a guitar (a play on words with *cantar*, to sing).





“If you live in this country, help save it,” was the slogan of the GreenCOM sponsored National Environmental Education Encounter held in San Salvador in 1996, shortly after the end of the country’s devastating war. The two hands in the poster show people of different politics coming together to mold a new country—pictured as a piece of clay—in peace (left). Other environmental education materials included teachers’ guides, videos, audio cassettes, and books (above).

of great use to students and GreenCOM distributed several thousand to schools (see Box 13.1).

To produce these supplements, the newspapers requested technical assistance from GreenCOM, recommending the subject matter and treatment, contacting the most highly regarded technical specialists and sources of information, arranging interviews, and reviewing the contents before publication.

Reward Journalists for Their Interest in Environmental Themes

In many nations, few communicators receive acknowledgments for their important work of providing information and shaping opinions. One way

to obtain greater media coverage of environmental themes is to create a competition with awards for journalists for published or broadcast works related to environmental themes (see Box 13.2). Numerous private businesses, whose public relations policies are focused on maintaining the best relations with the communications media, are usually willing to finance this type of initiative.

Environmental topics are not only for the news and editorial pages. Many newspapers have special sections for women or for children, financial supplements for business people, sections on agriculture, or development. Given the global dimension of the environment and its relationship with all human activities, it should not be difficult to integrate environmental themes into these sections.

BOX 13.1

The *Guañaquín* Bridges Formal and Nonformal Education

The *Guañaquín* newspaper supplement for children produced by *El Diario de Hoy* is the most successful example of the pairing of mass communication with formal education. This Sunday supplement for children was seen as an enormous potential for youth education as soon as it was launched.

GreenCOM met with executives of the newspaper to urge them to incorporate environmental themes into the popular supplement. It was agreed to dedicate one edition each month to environmental themes. GreenCOM offered the technical assistance as well as reference materials and specialized sources of information.

Guañaquín promoted an annual contest about the environment for all of the nation's children with prizes donated by the newspaper. In 1994, 2,500 entries were submitted for the first contest titled "Let's Paint El Salvador Green." In 1995, the second contest, "Let's Work for our Environment," 10,000 entries were submitted. In 1996, a new contest was announced under the title "Defenders of the Environment" which received 36,000 entries from across the country. In 1997, the *Guañaquín* contest drew more than 101,000 entries.

GreenCOM also evaluated whether teachers were actually using the supplement in the class-

room. Eighty five percent of the teachers interviewed and a similar percentage of students used the supplement as a reference source for their homework, planning their science, health, and environment classes and conducting the experiments outlined in its pages.

This children's supplement is an example of how mass media can effectively reinforce the work of environmental education in schools. As a product of the evaluation and recommendation of GreenCOM, the contents of the *Guañaquín* will follow the guidelines and programming of the Ministry of Education for the science, health and environment subject area.

BOX 13.2

National Environmental Journalism Awards

In El Salvador, GreenCOM established the National Environmental Journalism Awards in 1996 to stimulate reporters to write about environmental topics and to thank those already covering environmental themes in the media for their efforts.

The prizes are awarded annually in three categories: print media, radio, and television, with a first, second and third place awards in each category. Three private businesses sponsored the awards. The procedures stipulate that a call for nominations be issued to journalists requesting works published or broadcast in the previous year. A jury is formed of

two NGO representatives, one representative of the Communications faculty of the University of El Salvador, one technical staff member from the Executive Secretariat for the Environment and one representative of the Association of Journalists of El Salvador (APES). Evaluation criteria were established by the jury.

The awards are given each April during the week of Earth Day. The first event in 1996 for works produced during 1995 received a total of 47 entries. In addition to the nine awards, special recognition was given to one of the daily newspapers of greatest circulation for its con-

tribution to environmental education. In the second event in 1997, 147 works were submitted. Nine awards were given and nine institutions, media organizations, and journalists received special recognition for their outstanding contributions in defense of the environment.

The National Environmental Journalism Awards have achieved in only two years an enormous credibility and prestige in the union of journalists. This is reflected in the increase of nominations for the installments and in the massive attendance at the awards ceremonies, as well as the coverage given by the media.

A NATIONAL EE STRATEGY

Since launching the national environmental education strategy in 1994, GreenCOM has led the nation of El Salvador in the organization and training of an environmental community that participated in a process to design a National Environmental Education Policy. That Policy was begun at a three-day conference called the National Environmental Education Encounter. Three participatory planning meetings were held to involve representatives from the formal, non-formal, and informal EE communities. They created a showcase of their achievements and built from their successes to fabricate a new plan to continue their work. In small working groups, conference participants had a chance to voice their ideas for the national policy. The conference evaluated environ-

mental education in the country, identified the institutions that could help plan a strategy with the representatives of these institutions, and assigned responsibilities to each institution.

In the ensuing year, representatives from each group fine-tuned the policy for presentation to the Ministry of Education and the Executive Secretariat (now in the Ministry of Environment). Institutions and NGOs developed the capacity to execute their responsibilities.

By 1996 each institution was developing activities under the coordination of the Executive Secretariat of the Environment (SEMA) and the technical assistance and advice of GreenCOM. At the National Encounter for Environmental Education that year the groups formulated a proposal for a national environmental education policy (see Box 13.3).

BOX 13.3**More Than 1,000 People Confer on EE Policy**

In El Salvador, more than 1,000 people gathered for a national conference, or “Encounter,” to develop a national strategy that would lead to specific policies implementing environmental education. Even the opposition party showed up at the event, which was opened by the nation’s President. One year later a second national encounter kept the public’s interest and involvement and led to a more complete implementation of the strategy.

This support-building method guaranteed the adoption of the national environmental education strategy by the institutions involved and built political support for the policy.

SUMMARY

By working closely with the decisionmakers in the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Education, and by involving professionals in the process of designing and extending training programs, GreenCOM enhanced an entire EE community across the country. The capacity to continue this work has been established within organizations and agencies through the development of offices, procedures, policies, and materials. A framework has been constructed for others to prosper.