

Centre for Research in Education and the Environment (CREE)
Research Seminar
University of Bath

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Environmental psychology and sustainable development: implications for environmental education

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The Environmental Psychology Research Group at the University of Surrey has been undertaking research on various facets of the perception of global environmental change and sustainable development for nearly fifteen years. This seminar will begin with a brief overview of this research and critically discuss three problematic issues concerning the theories and assumptions commonly employed in environmental psychology to address issues of sustainable development and consumer behaviour: the almost exclusive focus on changing consumer behaviour with its individualistic and market-oriented implications; the loss of context in theorising about behaviour change; and the way in which the notion of sustainability is imported uncritically from political and governmental areas of debate. The last of these criticisms could equally be levelled at research and teaching within environmental education.

David Uzzell and Nora Räthzel have been working together for the last two years developing a critical approach to research on, and by implication the teaching of, sustainable development. In our paper we differentiate between strong and weak sustainability arguing that the analysis of sustainability and sustainable development strategies must be addressed at the level of the relations of production, consumption and political relations. Our view is that while the threatened environment must lie at the centre of concern, this threat can only be addressed by examining the social relations that cause and profit from endangering the environment. Having differentiated strong and weak sustainability in these terms, we conclude by suggesting a transformative environmental education model. We illustrate this through two examples of current educational practice: action competence and the Forum Theatre (Theatre of the Oppressed).