

Assembly 15 October 2007

Creating a Sustainable Environment

The Nobel Prize was established one hundred and twelve years ago. In 1895, Alfred Nobel, a chemist and industrialist from Sweden (who was the inventor of the high explosive dynamite) died and left in his will enough money for an annual award for Physics, Chemistry, Medicine, Literature and Peace. A prize in Economics, in memory of Nobel, was instituted by Sweden's central bank in 1968. Today, all six prizes are administered by the Nobel Foundation and are widely regarded as the highest award in the world in their subject areas.

The recipient of a Nobel Prize is called a Laureate and a maximum of three laureates may be selected per award each year. The winners of each Nobel Prize receive a gold medal, a diploma, and a cash grant. The grant is currently 10 million SEK, slightly more than HK\$12million – a significant amount of money. If there are two or three winners in a particular category, then the award grant is divided equally amongst the recipients. It is not uncommon for recipients to donate their prize money to benefit scientific, cultural or humanitarian causes.

You might have heard over the weekend that the Nobel Peace Prize for 2007 has been awarded to two recipients for their work on Global Warming: one being an organisation, the *United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (IPCC) and one being an individual, Mr. Al Gore. The citation for their award reads:

"For their efforts to build up and disseminate greater knowledge about man-made climate change and to lay the foundations for the measures that are needed to counteract such change".

The *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (IPCC) was established in 1988 to evaluate the risk of climate change brought on by humans. Al Gore was the 45th Vice-President of the United States, serving from 1993 to 2001 under President Bill Clinton. Al Gore presented the documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth*, which won an Academy Award. He lectures widely on the topic of global warming, which he calls "the climate crisis". Under his leadership a benefit concert, *Live Earth*, was held this year in an effort to raise awareness about climate change. On the 7 July, concerts were held in Sydney, Johannesburg, New York, Rio de Janeiro, Tokyo, Kyoto, Shanghai, London, Hamburg, Washington and Antarctica.

The United Nations has welcomed the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Al Gore and the UN climate panel because it has:

“Enshrined climate change as the inescapable issue of our time”
(*SCMP 13 October 2007*).

Two weeks ago, Mr. Yuen (Head of the English Department) and I attended a Conference and Workshops on International Education in Singapore. A major theme at the Conference was *Educating for Environmental Sustainability*. One of the keynote speakers said:

“We are not here to prepare students to live in the world as it will be –
we are here to prepare students to shape the world in which they will live.
We must have an unyielding commitment to learn more, teach better, act more wisely,
and cherish each other and this planet that is our only home”.

(David Hales)

On the opening morning of the Conference, two senior students from United World College, Singapore, stood in front of 600 principals and teachers from across the Asia-Pacific Region and explained what their school is doing about matters relating to the environment. They explained that at UWC ‘environmental sustainability’ is integrated across the curriculum and that there are 37 projects related to the environment currently being run and driven by the students. The two students were forceful in their arguments and made all in the adults in the audience feel very uncomfortable. They laid the blame for the world’s problems squarely on adults and demanded that adults needed to accept responsibility, be role models, and act now. As they said, it is wrong if today’s adults leave the problems of the future to be solved by today’s children.

They explained that carbon dioxide emissions from the burning of fossil fuels are causing the Earth’s climate to change and warm, which will have catastrophic results if we do not act to reduce them. The effects of climate change can be seen now. Temperatures are already increasing, glaciers are receding at unprecedented speeds, whole chunks of the Antarctic ice shelf are breaking off, warmer seasons are becoming longer, and storms are becoming more severe and causing more and more damage. The two UWC students said that offsetting your carbon footprint allows you to become part of the solution to climate change by supporting the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions equal to your carbon emissions. The central point is for individuals, business and communities around the world to *Reduce What You Can, Offset What You Can’t* (www.carbonfund.org)

The types of project operating at United World College, Singapore, were outlined by one of the school’s senior teachers. He told us that UWC had a nursery where they were growing thousands of saplings for replanting in barren areas of Singapore. The College has also purchased 4 hectares of land on the Indonesian Island of Sumatra where they will be planting trees to offset their ‘carbon footprint’ at school. The College has also imposed a ‘carbon tax’ on all overseas school trips, so that students and teachers understand the environmental cost of air travel.

Another interesting point raised by UWC is that in their experience we need to do more work with boys in getting them to understand environmental issues. At UWC, a co-educational school, they have found the girls to be more caring, understanding and aware of environmental issues – it is the boys who need guidance and direction!

So what are we doing at SPC to address environmental sustainability? The simple answer is “probably very little”. A quick audit of what we do in our College only tells us what we already know all too well: we waste paper; we waste electricity; we waste water; we do not take recycling seriously. The list goes on and I am sure that you can think of many things that we could be doing to improve our College environment. We ought to be following the 3 Rs: **Reduce, Reuse, Recycle**.

In July this year I met with Miss Lo, Miss Fung and a group of students in the Gardening Club. The students presented a proposal for a *Green Environment Campaign* in St. Paul’s College. I strongly support this initiative and I call on each of you, students and teachers, to do likewise. Is it not wise to start looking in our own backyard? The immediate issue for all of us at SPC is ‘local warming’ for by understanding and taking action at the local level we will be better placed to play our part in tackling ‘global warming’ and the question of environmental sustainability.