

What's At Stake?

By Maha Khalil

Middle of the 21st century... A 75 year old farmer in Egypt's northern delta examines a handful of his formerly-productive soil one last time: salt. It's all turned to salt... He takes one last glance towards the northern horizon. The Mediterranean has crept too close. His family's meager belongings are loaded onto a truck, and they are waiting for him. He heaves a sigh and turns his back on the sea, preparing to be relocated along with millions of other environmental refugees...

More and more people all over the world are becoming aware of the environmental crisis facing our planet today. Many if not most people at least have a vague idea about “global warming” or the “climate change phenomenon” and the threat of rising sea levels, unprecedented patterns of drought, flooding, storms, mass extinction of marine and terrestrial organisms and much more. Scientists have warned that if nothing is done to reduce green house gas emissions immediately, we may reach a point of no return and lose all hope of saving the planet...

Responses were slower and less assertive in some countries more than others. Egypt's response in particular, though not non-existent, remains unsatisfactory. Climate change scenarios predict that during this century, sea levels will rise between 1 and 3 feet, threatening Egypt by the submersion of up to a fourth of the delta and more than a third of the area of Alexandria. The salting of agricultural land will result in dramatically reduced crop yields; homes, ancient antiquities and industries will be lost, and millions of people will have to be relocated (Johnson 2007; Hansen 2008). The Egyptian government is formulating an adaptation plan which involves genetically modified crops, relocation strategies and the building of barriers in the sea, but, according to Dr. Elsayed Mansour, advisor to the Minister of Environmental Affairs, public awareness efforts are not met by the desired response from the public (Hansen, 2008).

It is true that Egypt is not a major contributor to green house gas emissions, but this does not mean that Egyptians have no responsibility. How could we raise our voices to other countries if public interest is lacking? And why is it lacking? Despite the status quo, I believe that with the right kind of interdisciplinary effort, the situation can be turned around, and Egypt *can* become one of the world's best examples of a country doing all it can to avert the approaching crisis.

We must first realize why it is difficult to generate public interest. Have you ever wondered why most visitors to Egyptian natural protectorates are foreign tourists and expatriates? Have you ever wondered why no Egyptians ever volunteer to work for the Society for Protection of Animal Rights in Egypt? Have you ever wondered why some people see that coastal infilling or the burial of coral reefs in the Red Sea to build hotels is “not a big deal” while

others see it as a crime? The answers to all such questions come down to a general cultural attitude of indifference fueled by ignorance and misconceptions.

Many Egyptians, especially in urban areas, do not have the attitude necessary for them to care about the environment in the first place. Receiving knowledge of the crisis alone – though important – is not enough to convey a sense of duty or responsibility or desire to affect change, particularly if the person on the receiving end does not believe that s/he *can* affect change. The recipient of the knowledge must first be made to care about the problem and realize that it is not outside his/her sphere of action. A scientist can only supply accurate information to as many people as possible. The rest, however, falls under the jurisdiction of others, namely teachers, politicians, scholars of religion, artists and writers. This massive inter-disciplinary effort is essential to recreate a culture that has the desirable attitude towards the environment.

As a child, I grew up mostly in Cairo with the idea that the term “wild animal” refers to a dangerous, savage creature that must be avoided and killed or fled if encountered. This was thanks to children’s stories, cartoons and movies about cunning foxes, evil wolves and savage lions and sharks that eat people. It took me a few years of direct and indirect exposition to different cultures to realize that the word “wild” simply means non-domesticated, and that a diversity of wild animals is an integral part of a country’s natural heritage and indeed vital to our survival as a species. Most of my free time and vacations were spent in man-made establishments such as sports clubs and sea-side resorts. To me, the sea was something to sit by in summer and an infinite source of fish. Only very recently, I discovered that there are activities which can be enjoyed in places called natural protectorates and national parks; that the sea offers much more than a pleasant view; that the supply of fish can be depleted; that the “desert” is not simply a fearful place to get lost in. The words “nature” and the “environment” took on entirely different meanings for me, and caused me to shift the course of my future to studying and working in the field of conservation. Once my attitude was shifted, it took me no time to realize that in fact caring about the environment is not merely in line with my education as a scientist, but that it is also in line with my religion, my sense of nationalism and my humanity.

But why would other people feel the same way I do now if their original misconceptions about wildlife, nature and the environment were never tackled? Why should they suddenly start caring about them simply because scientists are telling them to do so? If they continue to feel that these terms refer to alien things “outside” of them and their lives, why would they believe that their actions can affect them?

Thus, a fundamental cultural understanding of the importance of the environment and what it constitutes is lacking, and scientists alone cannot supply it. Early education is perhaps the most important factor to begin making the shift. From the first year of a child’s education, great care must be taken about what sorts of impressions are being made on the child through the story books s/he reads, the pictures s/he sees and the songs s/he sings. Many western schools employ simple creative ideas (such as class pets or plants and animal ambassadors that visit schools in

coordination with local zoos) which invoke a sense of responsibility towards other living things at an early age. For older pupils, fieldtrips to natural protectorates are infinitely more important than trips to amusement parks which have now become the standard in many schools in Cairo. Students can also take part in cleanup campaigns and experience the gratification of seeing the before and after pictures of a cleanup event accomplished by their own teamwork. Such activities would also bring the students in personal contact with local people who share their nationality and whose livelihoods depend on the environment. Successful fieldtrips would result in students spreading the information and, more importantly, their newly-found passion for the environment to family, friends and later to their own children. It would be the responsibility of highly dedicated teachers to make such trips and related projects as memorable as possible.

But, of course, education alone is not sufficient. For example, a school trip to the Giza Zoo nowadays could in fact have a negative effect on young students. The conditions at the zoo with its small, filthy enclosures, diseased, tortured and psychotic animals does nothing but reinforce the cultural notion that animals are disease-carrying vessels and that mistreating them is acceptable because they are inferior. It is far from providing the educational experience it is supposed to provide (Hoath, 2009). Here comes the role of politicians, NGOs and the media. The efforts of those groups can effectively raise enough donations and public interest to expose and drastically improve conditions at zoos and similar establishments around Egypt both for the animals as well as their human keepers. The media also has a vital role in changing the culture by producing impressive documentaries, programs and articles that supply audience of all ages with information on the culture of eco-tourism and Egypt's natural heritage, as well as inspire awe for the beauty and importance of nature to the continuity of the human race.

But modifying a culture is a long-term process. What can we do now alongside these long-term efforts? We must simply find the right argument for every group of people. And this is not difficult. After all, no one, no matter what their social or economic status may be, lives a life that does not essentially require a healthy environment. The businessman or the politician can be convinced to care about global warming just as easily as the enthusiast or the fisherman can be. For example, without the coral reefs of the Red Sea (which are in danger of disappearing due to climate change), most of the currently-standing hotels and resorts along the Red Sea coast would be out of business, and Egypt would consequently lose millions of pounds in annual income from Red Sea tourism, not to mention the thousands of people who will lose their livelihoods. So, by appealing to the importance of coral reefs alone, scientists, economists and the media can together convince and pressure hotel owners and everybody working in Red Sea tourism activities to adopt and/or collectively demand the adoption of environmentally-friendly strategies at the workplace and at home. On a different front, the family person may be convinced by appealing to their sense of duty towards their children and grandchildren's health and future, just as the car manufacturer could be convinced that he would make more money in the long term by producing more fuel-efficient cars. Thus, for some people, it is the economic argument that is

relevant, while to others, it may be the religious, personal or artistic argument. And this is why all disciplines must work together to create effective public awareness and interest.

A few groups of young people in Egypt have realized the need for cultural change and have taken initiative by creating eco-friendly groups. For example, groups of sportive young people have started several cycling groups in Egypt (such as the Cairo Cyclers' Club) which organize cycling events encouraging the idea of cycling as a healthy and environmentally-friendly alternative to driving. Two other groups have formed carpooling organizations in Cairo, saving on fuel costs as well as carbon emissions and the number of cars in the streets. Another initiative was taken by a recent graduate of AUC who has created an online magazine – EcoOptions Egypt – giving people positive ideas about what they can do in their daily lives to help in preserving the environment. Another project – Solar Cities – was also started several years ago and is now successfully providing solar water heaters to the slums of Cairo (Hansen, 2008).

Each one of us has something valuable at stake if we cannot slow climate change. For some people, it is their very home that is at stake with all its memories; for others, it is their business or their day-to-day livelihood; to others still, it is their health and that of their loved ones; and to others, it could be all the above and much more... All it takes to save what is at stake for us and for those we care about is a shift in attitude, and achieving this shift requires both knowledge as well as a deep-rooted belief in our power as individuals and groups to affect change in our spheres of action. And this requires a massive joint interdisciplinary effort between scientific and humanistic fields. Only then can we raise our voices effectively to the world and say, "We are doing all we can to save ourselves and you. What are *you* doing?"