

OBITUARY

Celebrating AAEE's first president: Peter James Fensham AO

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With great sadness, we acknowledge the death of Emeritus Professor Peter Fensham AO, the first President (1980–1982) of the Australian Association for Environmental Education (AAEE). Peter died in Melbourne on 23 August 2021, aged 93 years. We mourn his passing while celebrating his contributions to environmental education in Australia, and internationally.

Although well known within the environmental education community in Australia and internationally from the mid 1970s through to the 1990s, Peter was better known as a science educator (Cross, 2003a, 2003b; Gunstone, 2009). His undergraduate degree from The University of Melbourne was in science and his first PhD was in chemistry at the University of Bristol. He completed a second PhD in social psychology at the University of Cambridge before returning to Australia in 1955 to teach chemistry at the University of Melbourne. He was appointed as the first Professor of Science Education at Monash University in 1967. This was a controversial appointment as he had neither school teaching experience nor a postgraduate qualification in education. But his two PhDs had given him insight into two different worlds. As a result, he believed that science was not only a subject matter but also a tool for social change, and he argued for access to science for all students as opposed to a select minority of future scientists, in the hope that they would use it as a force for good in the wider world — that is, Science for All (Fensham, 1985).

That Peter came from science into environmental education was typical for the times. As I found in my investigation of the 'founders of environmental education' (Greenall Gough, 1993), those 'founders' who were advocating for environmental education in the 1960s and 1970s all had a university-level science background, and some did not have an education background. Indeed, at this time, science was seen as the natural 'home' for environmental education (although many geographers dispute this). Peter acknowledged this association himself in a reflection piece on AAEE's first 35 years:

in 1974 I, as the only science background person on the [Australian] UNESCO Committee (an indication of how the environment was then seen), was asked to convene a group (UNESCO Committee/CDC) to begin to plan a national meeting on Education and the Human Environment for later in 1975. (Fensham, 2015, p. 3).

This seminar was held in May 1975 (Linke, 1977), and soon after Peter was asked to represent Australia at a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) workshop convened in response to Recommendation 96 from the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm, Sweden. In this recommendation, Environmental Education was called upon as a means to address environmental issues worldwide. This

UNESCO International Environmental Workshop was held in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in October 1975. It proposed a global framework for environmental education, referred to as The Belgrade Charter.

Peter described this workshop as a ‘special epiphany event’ (Fensham, 2015, p. 3), one that was consistent with his social justice philosophy:

When a Czech speaker, on the second day, spoke in a manner that seemed patronising, there was a revolt of third world delegates led by Chiappo [see Chiappo, 1978], the Cuban delegate. Professor William (Bill) Stapp, the convenor (seconded to UNESCO from Michigan University) in a quite courageous way jettisoned his prepared agenda, and the meeting for the next three days became a most exciting workshop as first, second and third world delegates tried to see things from our own and their other perspectives. We shouted, but listened to each other, as we then set out to write and rewrite a statement that by the workshop’s end had become the Belgrade Charter, a clarion call for international cooperative action about education to save the environment.

Peter returned from the Belgrade workshop with notes of all the revisions and counter-revisions to the Charter text, after which the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) published his notes ‘in a way which indicated how tortuous such international agreement can be when it is honestly and well done’ (Fensham, 1985, p. 3) (see Fensham, 1976).

Following the Belgrade workshop, Peter was asked to chair the CDC study group on environmental education which was to make recommendations for a national environmental education programme for the CDC. The Environmental Education Project (EEP) that was the origin of AAEE resulted from one of the recommendations from this Study Group (CDC, 1978).

The EEP was a national project with liaison officers from each state and territory education department as part of its structure. As can be seen from the project’s culminating publications – *A Sourcebook for primary education* (CDC & EEP, 1981a) and *A Sourcebook for secondary education* (CDC & EEP, 1981b) – the *modus operandi* was to offer teachers and other educators small grants for them to describe their programmes or positions on particular aspects of environmental education. This approach was very much inspired by Peter’s belief that curriculum change only happened when teachers were supported by professional development and with models of good practice.

Peter was asked to be part of the Australian delegation to the UNESCO–UNEP Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education held in Tbilisi, in the then USSR, in October 1977. In the end, because of a succession of issues, including an election in Australia stopping the Minister attending (Fensham, 2015), he headed the delegation. Out of his participation emerged a report on the conference (Fensham, 1978b) and a paper that is considered by many to be a landmark contribution reviewing ‘the nature of the ideas, programs and initiatives that now characterise environmental education, internationally and nationally’ (Fensham, 1978a, p. 446). He returned home in time to present, at a national conference on policies and strategies for the future in environmental education, a paper on some problems for Australian environmental education which was based on his experience at the international environmental education conferences. He presented the problems without solutions ‘because that would be contrary to the nature of environmental education’ (Fensham, 1977, p. 1) and indicated that he was reaching some different conclusions about the relationships between knowledge, mental and manual skills, attitudes and application (Fensham, 1977, pp. 9–10):

Usually with both formal and informal education there is an inbuilt assumption that this list also means the sequence for learning . . . there is some evidence that can encourage us to think of reversing the sequence and beginning with action, or at least breaking up the sequence and much more concurrently relating knowledge, skill and attitude learning to

action programmes in the environment of the school and in that wider community environment in which the school is set.

Given his standing, leadership and thinking around environmental education, and his experience in leading other associations (e.g. he was President of the Australian Science Teachers' Association, 1972–1974) and founded the Australian [now Australasian] Science Education Research Association in 1970), it is not surprising that he was asked to be the first AAEE President (1980–1982).

Peter's thinking about environmental education continued to evolve. Reflecting back on his 1977 writing in 1987, he noted with respect to the characteristics of Australian environmental education as he saw them in 1977, 'we were not to see ourselves as apart from but integrally part of the Australian environment(s)' and 'action and learning were seen as being symbiotic aspects of environmental education in all its stages — a very different pedagogical view from that which prevails in much of substantial learning' (Fensham, 1987a, p. 22).

Some of this thinking was reflected in his writing in the *Australian Journal of Environmental Education* (AJEE). For example, he co-authored a research article on what Victorian students' perceptions tell us about environmental education (Johnson & Fensham, 1987) and another on developments and challenges in Australian environmental education (Fensham, 1990). Peter was also referenced in 20 other articles in AJEE, including by Andrew and Malone (1995), Ballantyne, Anderson, and Packer (2010), Bradley (2011), Cosgrove and Thomas (1996), Di Chiro (1987), Fien (2001), Gough (2004, 2011, 2014), Greenall Gough (1991), Hart (1990), Lebo and Eames (2015), Malcolm (1991), Paige, Lloyd, and Smith (2016), Robottom (1984, 1989, 1990), Skamp (1991), Stevenson and Evans (2011), Thomas (1992), and Yueh and Barker (2011), as well as editorials.

Peter was part of the Australian delegation to the UNESCO-UNEP International Congress on Environmental Education and Training held in Moscow, USSR, in August 1987, which proposed an *International Strategy for Action in the Field of Environmental Education and Training for the 1990s* (UNESCO-UNEP, c.1988). Fensham (1987b) provided a 'veteran's' reflection on this congress for the AAEE newsletter.

His 1990 reflection on the place of environmental education in the school curriculum, published in this journal, provided much food for thought. He was optimistic about the future because he saw the environment as an international political priority again. Writing from a Victorian curriculum perspective he was upbeat. Even though recent reforms has turned the senior secondary school subject Environmental Science into Environmental Studies, he saw potential in other areas of study including Science, Chemistry, Australian Studies and Technology Studies. He also recognised that Environmental Studies faced challenges including its conceptual content and trying to get environmental education incorporated into other study designs, but most importantly, for teachers to get students involved in investigations and projects rather than just teaching them.

Peter retired from Monash University in 1992 and subsequently became an adjunct professor at the Queensland University of Technology and then Science Education Ambassador for Queensland (2003–2010). He nevertheless remained active in environmental education. He chaired the Victorian Environmental Education Council from its inception in 1989 to its demise in 1993, and he continued to be a spokesperson for environmental education in a wide range of forums. As he wrote, 'In the 2000s my continuing link with environmental issues has been more participatory, through being in touch with specific community projects for EE and through non-government organisations to which I belong' (Fensham, 2015, p. 4).

His last written contribution to the field was his personal retrospective on his AAEE presidency (Fensham, 2015), although he also attended the 2016 AAEE Conference dinner in Adelaide in 2016.

Peter's passing gives pause for reflection on where AAEE has come from and where we are going. If we had had a different first president, we could well have ended up in a very different

direction. A strong educational leader and advocate for social justice, Peter set us on a curriculum reformist pathway that has been difficult to maintain with the development of the Australian Curriculum, but in his memory we should maintain our rage and keep pursuing the challenge of mainstreaming environmental education.

Vale, Peter Fensham.

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