

BALTIC SEA: INTRODUCTION TO NATURE 101

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High school students in Kalmar, Sweden, are not learning about the environment from textbooks. By taking water samples and analyzing their make-up, they are learning about pollution in the Baltic Sea. Their high school is one of 200 institutions working together in the Associated Schools Project Network (ASPnet) to try to improve environmental conditions in the landlocked sea.

On the second floor of the Jenny Niström high school in Kalmar, a small port in southeastern Sweden, the laboratory used by the environmental awareness class is spotless. Various lab instruments arranged neatly on the shelves, often made by the students themselves, are used to analyze samples taken on school field trips. In one corner, two glass beakers on a burner contain yellowish liquids. "It's an experiment in progress," says earth science professor Sven Åhlin, explaining that the students are inspecting water taken from a pond near Kalmar, which could contain suspicious substances.

On the balcony behind the lab, a small greenhouse houses several aquariums where plants of all kinds are growing. "The students planted them and they take care of them," Åhlin insists. The results of each experiment carried out by the

students are carefully logged in a notebook so that the class can study the evolution of environmental conditions in the Kalmar area.

These experiments are more than just a classroom science lesson: they are evidence of true interest in the environment. And that interest did not just crop up yesterday. Since the high school opened its doors in 1992, Åhlin has taken his students every year to collect samples from the Baltic Sea in order to observe the evolution of the water quality.

The results have been poor. Very poor, even. "Not only have the levels of phosphorus and nitrogen continued to increase," says the teacher, who speaks of the "eutrophication of the Baltic Sea". But since he moved to Öland Island, just off the coast of Kalmar, more than 20 years ago, Åhlin has noticed other dramatic changes. "Several species of fish are in the process of disappearing, and bird fertility rates are consistently dropping", he says. He is not the only one who is alarmed. At a meeting of European Union environment ministers in Brussels on March 10, Lena Sommestad warned her colleagues. Citing the worrying conclusions of a report published in early March in Stockholm, the Swedish minister said that without quick and effective action, the Baltic Sea, its marine life on the point of suffocating, soon would be beyond help.

But Åhlin, who is in his 50s, refuses to give in to pessimistic predictions. On the contrary, the

teacher is convinced that "the future of the planet lies with the younger generations". And that's one of the reasons why he chose, starting in 1992, to participate along with his students in the Baltic Sea project. Launched three years earlier, the project stemmed from a conference of European education ministers held at UNESCO's Paris headquarters in 1988. At that meeting, the ministers in attendance agreed on two points. One, they acknowledged the need to improve water quality in the Baltic Sea, and two, they voiced their wish to bolster relations between young people in the region.

200 SCHOOLS LOOKING FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SOLUTIONS

Inspired, Finland's national commission for UNESCO invited representatives from all countries bordering the Baltic Sea to Helsinki in May 1989. The commission proposed to launch a project aimed at "encouraging schools in the countries along the Baltic Sea to reflect together on the environmental problems that the region and its residents must face". The initiative, sponsored by UNESCO's Associated Schools Project Network, earned a favorable response.

Fifteen years later, more than 200 schools are participating in the Baltic Sea project in Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Poland, Germany, Russia and the three Baltic states. And while the goal has not

Shallow and partially closed, the Baltic is threatened with eutrophication due to pollution

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Every year, students take samples to evaluate water quality



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► changed since 1989, the Baltic Sea project is now focused on the idea of sustainable development. As the coordinator of the Swedish project, Martin Westin, explains, “the goal is to help students understand the scientific, social and cultural aspects of the relationship between man and nature”.

KEY INGREDIENTS, STUDENT EXCHANGE AND COOPERATION

Even more so than environmental awareness, the project aims to encourage students in different countries to work together. For the past several years, Åhlin has worked with high schools in Kalmar’s two sister cities in Lithuania and Russia -- schools that are not yet participating in the Baltic Sea project but which are soon expected to join UNESCO’s Associated Schools Project Network. In May 2003, about 30 students from the high school in Zelenogradsk, in Russia’s Kaliningrad province, spent a week in Kalmar before welcoming their Swedish counterparts the following autumn. An “unforgettable” experience, according to Stina Andersson and Maria Carlsson, two high school graduates who made the trip.

Despite their initial apprehension, “we quickly realized that despite our cultural differences, we pretty much had the same values,” says Maria. “We all had the same goal: the fight to protect our environment,” adds Stina. This is a point of view shared by Therese Henriksson, a student in her final year of high school who participated last September in a conference in Nacka, near Stockholm, organized

by the central board of the Baltic Sea project. For one week, about 100 youths from nine countries bordering the Baltic Sea and from the region around Africa’s Lake Victoria studied the problem of eutrophication and its consequences for the survival of tuna.

Before the Nacka conference, each school invited drew up proposals aimed at stamping out the scourge threatening the Baltic Sea. “Nearly 70 percent of cultivated land in Sweden produces fodder,” explains Therese. “It would therefore be good to reduce meat production in order to slow the production of fodder and cut the use of fertilizer, traces of which are still being found in rivers and the sea.” That was just one suggestion discussed during the week of seminars, at which experts listened attentively to the ideas put forth by the youths.

Therese, who is 19, admits that even just a few years ago, the environment was not exactly one of her top priorities. But after three years at Jenny Nyström high school, she says she is now aware of the important consequences her actions may have for the environment. Once she graduates, she hopes to enroll at the environmental sciences school at the University of Umeå in northern Sweden.

But Sven Åhlin wants to keep things in perspective. “My goal is not to turn all of my students into fire-breathing ecologists, but to turn them into responsible adults,” he says. Mission accomplished? Since 1992, things have really changed at Jenny Nyström high. Not only does the cafeteria sort its recyclable garbage, the school has 30 bicycles for use on field trips and its environmental council is hoping to soon receive the “green high school” seal of approval.

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Students learn ecology in the field



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