

NOTES, NEWS & COMMENTS

'Johnny Biosphere'

Johnny Biosphere: Who is he? How did he originate? What is he doing? Where is he going? These are the questions to be answered here.

'Johnny Biosphere' is my assumed name when I wander around the Earth with a globe on my back talking to people and television viewers about the importance of our planetary living and life-support system, The Biosphere. The globe is connected by wires to a back-pack containing a tape-recorder and rechargeable battery. Two leather straps hang down on either side of my chest. Pressing the button on the strap labelled 'BIOSPHERE' causes the globe to reverberate with wolf howls, bird calls, frog voices, whale conversations, thunder, and lightning. Pressing the button on the strap labelled 'ECOSYSTEM' causes the globe to light up—if the person touching it has done something good for his or her ecosystem that day. The wordless message is a reminder: what we do affects The Biosphere, and what The Biosphere does affects us. The message does not have to be translated or explained to be understood.

Knowing that images can be more powerful than words, I spent three years in search of an image to focus greatly increased attention on The Biosphere. The idea of carrying a globe on my back came in the spring of 1980, after frustration in getting the Governing Council of UNEP to support a proposal for an International Year of The Biosphere (Vallentyne *et al.*, 1980). The incipient 'Johnny' presented the image in public at the First Global Conference on the Future (Toronto, 20–27 July 1980). Since then he has carried his simple message to various countries, including Canada and the United States, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, France, Germany, Spain, India, and Japan, as part of the World Campaign for The Biosphere (Anon., 1982; Polunin, 1982). His objective is to interest the indifferent in The Biosphere. Media coverage has included newspapers, radio, and television.

The idea of Johnny Biosphere started from a comment by Domenico Povoledo, of the Freshwater Institute in Winnipeg, Manitoba, on the difference in physician–patient relationship between an 'environmental physician' and a human physician. In the former the relationship is one-to-many and remote; in the latter it is one-to-one and very personal. The problem was, how to make ecology personal (Vallentyne, 1982). The technique was to get people to feel the ecological consequences of collective actions. For example, after a technical description of acid rain, Johnny sprays people with acid rain. Similarly, to illustrate the suicidal implications of exponential growth, Johnny successively drinks 1, 2, 4, and 8, 'shots' of whisky over five-minutes' intervals or, with children, blows up a balloon (The Biosphere) until it bursts. If not ordered to stop, he scolds his audience for their immoral behaviour in allowing him to 'blow up The Biosphere' or drink himself to death.

In response to requests to talk at elementary schools, Johnny has developed an action-packed 30-minutes' programme that has children jumping and screaming while learning about The Biosphere through stories concerning their 'personal ecosystems', acid rain, pollution, recycling, feedback, nuclear war, and proper food and nutrition. After watching one of these fast-moving performances, Pat Hayes, an environmental educator and nurse from Dunnville, Ontario, said in surprise: 'You're Johnny Biosphere!' At first I reacted negatively to the name, thinking it too 'folksy'; but on reflection I realized that it was the ultimate in making ecology personal (Fig. 1). Now, through Johnny, *Biosphere* is in the headlines; it is also being adopted more and more widely as a key concept in scientific circles and



Johnny Biosphere

FIG. 1. A cartoon of 'Johnny Biosphere' in action, by James Kempkes, Toronto, Canada.

is even being used quite freely in lay ones—unfortunately often without much real understanding of what it means!

Johnny currently divides his time about equally between adults and children. He has performed to 'flesh and blood' audiences ranging up to 1,000 in various parts of the world—most recently on World Environment Day in connection with the first General Assembly of the World Council For The Biosphere and the International Society For Environmental Education in New Delhi, India (1–9 June, 1984)* (Fig. 2), and at a Green Youth Convention in conjunction with the Shiga Conference on Conservation and Management of World Lake Environment in Japan (27–31 August 1984). Talks to school-children or youth-groups in any part of the world can be arranged in advance at no cost other than local expenses if they are on one of Johnny's pre-scheduled itineraries.

Through media coverage Johnny's message has reached several hundred million people in his first four years of operation. Each year the numbers have increased exponentially. Johnny's aim as part of The World Campaign for The Biosphere (cf. Davis, 1983) is to present his globe-on-back image and underlying concept of The Biosphere at least eight times to a significant fraction of the human population of the Earth by 1992. Eight is the number of times that linguists say a word must be seen in different contexts to be remembered and fully understood. 'Significant' could be as much as 20%; and 1992 will be the 500th anniversary of the rediscovery of the New World by Christopher Columbus. The fact that no new worlds will have been discovered for 500 years might suggest that it is time to live ecologically on the one we have!

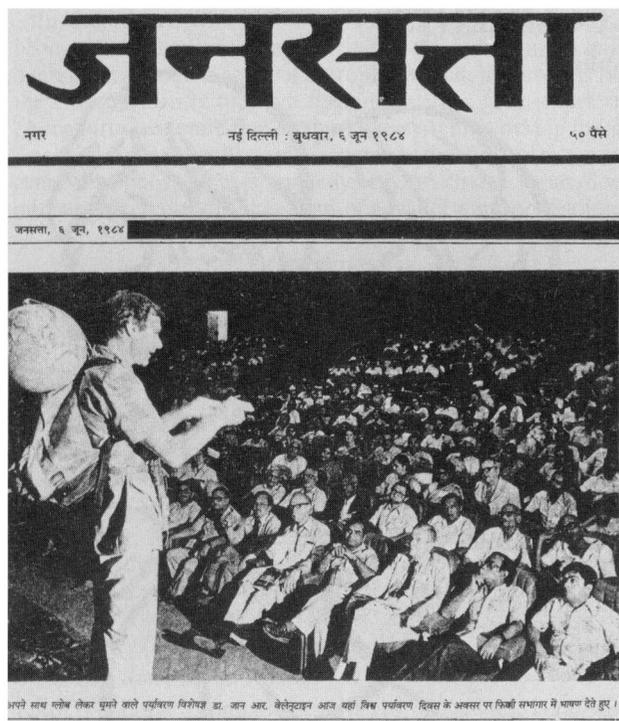


FIG. 2. Reproduction of the front page of an Indian newspaper showing 'Johnny Biosphere' addressing a large and crowded audience in New Delhi, India, on World Environment Day, 5 June 1984, in connection with the first General Assembly of WCB-ISEE (see text).

The Biosphere and Ourselves†

We define The Biosphere as: 'The integrated living and life-supporting system comprising the peripheral envelope of Planet Earth together with its surrounding atmosphere so far down, and up, as any form of life exists naturally.' By 'Ourselves' we understand the human species, *Homo sapiens*, of whatever race or creed.

Leading points about The Biosphere are (1) it constitutes a single whole of which we humans are an integral part, (2) we are utterly dependent on it for our own substance and wherewithal of life, (3) it is resilient but nevertheless destructible and in several ways even fragile, such that (4) it is being more and more gravely threatened by growing human numbers and activities.

Leading points about humans are that (1) they are unique in their possession of a conscious intelligence enabling them *inter alia* to invent intricate machines and pass on their learning, (2) the one thing they appear incapable of doing is limiting their own numbers peacefully despite having the necessary knowledge and means, (3) they are for ever increasing their demands on the limited resources of The Biosphere, and (4) their growth in numbers and impact cannot go on indefinitely on our finite globe.

For some years we have been developing a World Campaign for The Biosphere, with the primary objective of educating people everywhere about The Biosphere and the need to safeguard it if Mankind and Nature are to survive in at all happy concert. The second objective of The Campaign is to have people throughout the world realize that their own part of The Biosphere is important as a component of the integrated whole, and have them act as responsible and concerned guardians of it. We even feel that people should be emotional or at least

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* See also pp. 371–3 of this issue, Johnny's show on those occasions was so impressively successful that there were calls afterwards for making it into a film, the practicability of which suggestion is being pursued in suitable quarters.—Ed.

dedicated in this respect; treating their part of The Biosphere in terms of a quasi-religion of reverence for life.

Probably of all human callings, that of the farmer is most conducive to this responsible stewardship, and so it is a special privilege to introduce this theme in the world's most populous country at Agro-China '84. In humble consciousness of your being an agricultural country first and foremost, who are most admirably tackling the basic problem of human population, I do so in my capacity as President of the World Council For The Biosphere (WCB), which has recently been constituted primarily to take over the above-mentioned Campaign, and which shares a Secretariat in Columbus, Ohio, with its sister organization the International Society For Environmental Education (ISEE).*

Finally, examples are given particularly of agricultural or related activities in the context of biospherical ethics and potential survival. On the positive side we cite the planting of trees, which will improve the local environment, remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, and help ultimately to stabilize the world climate. On the negative side we cite over-use of soil fertilizers, which can lead to soil and freshwater degradation, and to ultimate reduction of the stratospheric ozone shield—without which life as we know it on Earth could scarcely continue. Other examples of local actions affecting The Biosphere are, on the negative side, the clearance of forests and the burning of coal and, on the positive side, genetic manipulation with its enormous potential for increasing land productivity through improved crops.

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† * Footnotes on next page (foot of left-hand column).