Our ecologically illiterate presidential candidates

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Concerns have been expressed regarding the presidential candidates' lack of consideration of environmental topics.

An editorial in the June 22 The Jakarta Post lamented that in the first presidential debate, the candidates' responses to environmental problems, in this case the Lapindo mudflow tragedy, were disappointing. Economic issues have dominated the campaign season.

This is understandable, as economic matters play a very substantial role in people's lives. However, without paying attention to ecological sustainability, the hope for long-term economic prosperity can only be a dream.

But is this only their fault? I would argue not. As professional politicians, the candidates are fully aware of political market behaviour.

They understand their dependency on voters. Voters are their consumers, as well as "the king", even though this special position is only recognized during the election time.

Because those leaders fully realize what their constituents want, environmental issues are not a major concern. They know that we citizens and voters are ecologically illiterate.

Environmental subjects are not "sexy" or marketable. As a result, the importance of the sustainability as a foundation for natural resource-based economics is not a significant issue.

We could again look at, for example, the mudflow tragedy. The root of this problem was actually that the government failed to properly manage development.

It is true that Lapindo caused the problem, but the government failed to monitor their mining activities.

However, the government's inability to deal with this significant environmental problem is not affecting the Yudhoyono administration's popularity, as indicated by polls and surveys. Most of us have already forgotten the problem.

It would be worthwhile to rethink our understanding and commitment as citizens to the principles of ecological sustainability. The government's lack of concern for environmental issues reflects our lack of awareness of ecological consequences.

Not surprisingly, ecological disasters keep occurring in this beautiful country. Consequently, development in this nation will not reach the sustainable ideal.

In truth, the ability to create sustainable development and live harmoniously with nature is technically possible.
If we try to dig deeper, the lack of ecological awareness among the people can be attributed to the inability of our education system to instill environmental sensitivity. In a report by Kompas (May 29), it was revealed that many teachers could not answer many questions about environmental problems. But of course it is not totally those teachers' fault.

Our education system seems unable to develop healthy minds and souls and fostering environmental compassion is a symptom of this problem.

A good education, according to David Orr in his essay in Ecological Literacy (2005), is not simply a mastery of a subject matter, but also a cultivation of values. Education, he said, "has to deal with the timeless question of how we are to live."

It is sad then, that when we look at our schools we see that our education focuses only on quantitative achievements. There is no appreciation given to other achievers, such as environmentally friendly students.

This paradigm is not only present in schools, but is also implanted in parent's minds. No wonder our leaders are concerned only with their quantitative popularity. The political process is an educational process. Its place as a field for the cultivation of values has never been seriously considered.

It was not an exaggeration when Orr insisted that "the ecological crisis is in every way a crisis of education."

Therefore, now is the right time to assess the capacity of our education system to raise ecologically literate citizens.

If environmental education is offered to the stakeholders, they often argue that our school curriculum is full. But environmental education could be integrated to many subjects.

The main problem is actually that one important aspect of education has been neglected: education should be enjoyable. The rigid quantitative restraints of study have rendered schools unenjoyable for students.

Therefore, education innovations must be made. In Laskar Pelangi (Rainbow Soldier) we saw how Muslimah, the teacher, took her students to the beach for a science class. Michael Stone, in another essay, "Ecological literacy" (2005), told a similar story about a STRAW (Students and Teachers Restoring a Watershed) project.

In this project, students of a local Marin County (USA) school reintroduced freshwater shrimp to a creek from which it had disappeared. From this project, students learned many things. They studied river ecology as well as zoology and botany. They even started to understand political science, as they had to liaise with local farmers in order to get support for the project. This was fun, but the students also learned many subjects in one project.

If we would like to raise people's understanding of the threats of the ecological crisis, we have to begin with education, from elementary to tertiary.

Environmental education means not just creating an ecologically literate society but also breeding leaders with an environmental vision. Maybe then environmentally sustainable development and a harmoniously existence with nature can become a reality.

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