

Article

Don't Panic! And Other Principles for Environmental Educators in an Era of Authoritarian Extractivism

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Abstract

This paper, based on a keynote given at the Nordic Environmental and Sustainability Educators Conference, explores a set of principles that might inform the responses of environmental educators, in particular those working in Europe, to the growth in political authoritarianism allied with climate denial and ecological extractivism. Taking the form of a manifesto and intended to prompt debate and mutual support, the piece proposes 11 principles: Don't panic; Acknowledge your own emotions; Explore Possibilities Beyond the Classroom; Work with hope as praxis; Proliferate stories of change; Nurture alternatives; Name and protect gains; Diversify resources and tactics; Practice simple sabotage; See the bigger picture; and Don't forget the dancing.

Keywords: authoritarianism; extractivism; education; resistance; affect

1. Introduction

Early in 2025, sometime around the period when the President of the United States announced his pick of an oil baron for Energy Secretary and decided not to send a delegation to COP, we (two academics working in the UK and studying education systems' responses to a changing climate) began to wonder how European environmental educators might respond to a similar politics of authoritarian extractivism. Did we have smart political strategies beyond protest and pleas? Did we have more resilient networks and institutions that could survive political interference? Could we build political alliances across sufficiently diverse communities to sustain research and practice that might be seen as politically out of favour?

At around the same time Benjamin Knutsson and Sally Windsor invited one of us (Keri) to give a keynote at the Nordic Environmental and Sustainability Educators Conference. As part of this talk, she developed a set of 7 principles to inform educators' responses to anti-ecological—or 'extractivist'—authoritarianism. Following the event, we began to think more systematically together, drawing also on Lara's experience in Russian universities. We explored the literature that might help us address these questions and shared early versions of the principles more widely, inviting comments and suggestions from educators in related fields.

From this process, we propose the following 11 principles as resources for stretching the imagination, reflecting on current practice and developing preparatory resilience (as well as resistance tools) for those working in contexts like Europe, where extractivist authoritarianisms are not yet complete nor secure. These are:

- Principle 1: Don't panic (you are not alone).
- Principle 2: Acknowledge your own emotions (don't become authoritarian yourself).



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- Principle 3: Explore possibilities beyond the classroom (find allies and action elsewhere).
- Principle 4: Work with hope as praxis (not wishful thinking).
- Principle 5: Proliferate stories of change (it's not all about heroes).
- Principle 6: Nurture alternatives (take care of what is already growing).
- Principle 7: Name and protect gains (don't forget what has been achieved).
- Principle 8: Diversify resources and tactics (build redundancy and resilience).
- Principle 9: Practice simple sabotage (it's possible to disrupt from the inside).
- Principle 10: See the bigger picture (practice solidarity with those who have been doing this for a while).
- Principle 11: Don't forget the dancing (and the sense of humour).

These eleven principles are presented here less as a typical academic paper and more in the spirit of a 'manifesto', a provocation that we hope will prompt debate and action and whose purpose is to bolster reflection and discussion in the community of environmental and sustainability educators ([Hanna & Ashby, 2022](#)). In terms of its scholarly coherence, some will regret the absence in this paper of more substantive theoretical or empirical support for each principle; others will argue that it is already too abstract to make its point clearly. Our aim, however, is to produce a piece that prompts discussion, and we are grateful to the editors of this Special Issue for making space for this sort of contribution. As [Beckerman \(2023\)](#) has argued, after all, one of the first steps required to incubate change and resistance is the tentative articulation of emergent principles and intentions within communities; 'counterpublics' have to be constituted in which ideas can be rapidly shared and contested if hegemonic power is to be challenged ([Fraser, 1990](#)).

In writing these principles, we recognise that educators are working in very different positions around the world in relation to extractivist authoritarianism. Some are already at the very sharp end of live conflicts for land and rights, working on daily struggles to reclaim land and livelihoods in the wake of centuries of violent extractivism ([Estes, 2019](#)) or fighting to maintain dignity and autonomy in the face of political crackdowns (see for example, the recent 'Mr Nobody Against Putin' film¹). Others, particularly in Europe, have been more insulated from these conflicts, working in societies which have historically benefited from the deployment of extractivist authoritarianisms far from home ([de Oliveira Andreotti, 2021](#)). Even in Europe, however, degrees of insulation are situated and provisional; for many brown and black people, for queer and Indigenous peoples, for those with few financial or material resources, the forces of authoritarianism, the denial of freedom, dignity and autonomy for diverse ways of being, have been in play for a long time ([Girardi, 2022; Jones, 2017](#)).

These principles, then, speak into an ambiguous temporality. We recognise that the future of extractivist authoritarianisms is at once emerging, already present and actively being challenged in different places at different times for different people. These principles, then, are not solely 'pre-emptive'. Rather, they are invitations to learn from and part of an ongoing struggle to maintain diverse, open and abundant forms of human and ecological life. These principles will be of variable utility to educators working in different conditions—for some this will already be familiar practice, for others this will be new, for others they may be wildly inappropriate. What we hope, however, is that they might be used to invite dialogue across different communities of educators working at different levels of intensity of struggle. In particular, for those of us working in Europe, we hope that they can prompt debate and discussion, some reflection and hopefully collective organising.

In developing these principles, as educational researchers, we also noted two things: first, that the research literature describing the effects of working under conditions of political and social oppression remains much more substantial than the literature proposing what to do and how to respond to such these conditions ([Giroux, 2017](#)); second, that

educators' resistance is often understood to reside primarily in relation to action within classrooms, with limited attention given to the role of educators as researchers, as citizens, as employees, as union members, or as political and social actors. We hope that these principles might also be used by researchers, then, as lines of inquiry for research and for expanding the conceptual frames with which we approach the potential of educators as social actors as well as pedagogues. It is not enough, in our view, to research the effects of authoritarianism and oppression in education; it is necessary also to research how, in practice, such effects might be challenged and eroded.

We should also clarify our use of the term 'authoritarian extractivism'. We use this term to describe the articulation (in a Gramscian sense) of political oligarchies with fossil and other extractivist (including mining) industry interests. It becomes highly visible in two areas: the forced imposition of both traditional fossil fuel infrastructure and so-called 'green' infrastructures on land and people irrespective of harm, need or resistance (Estes, 2019; Ulloa, 2023); and in the form of what Mau and colleagues call the 'migration-climate' coupling, which links climate denial and authoritarian politics to fuel populist and right-wing political movements (Mau et al., 2026). Authoritarian extractivism, in other words, is characterised by the convergence of politically authoritarian politics with active exploitation and harm to land and the demonisation and othering of those who are displaced by the consequences of political-ecological disruptions. At its heart, it is a profound breakdown in human and more-than-human relationality (Oliveira, 2025), a breakdown that tends towards uniformity, monocultures and compliance.

We write these principles, however, from a foundational conviction that other worlds are possible. As both Mau et al. (2026) and the new Global Justice Report (Global Justice Project, 2026) demonstrate, it is neither impossible nor unpopular to challenge the massive wealth inequalities that both fuel and are sustained by authoritarian extractivism, and there are also pathways to create socially just, inclusive and ecologically sustainable societies.

In making these arguments, however, we think it is also worth noting, and we discuss this below (Principle 2), that the climate and ecology movement has its own latent authoritarian tendencies, and has the potential to be co-opted for economic extractivism at the expense of diverse lifeworlds (see, e.g., Amnesty International & Sámi Council, 2025). Our intention here, therefore, is to foreground tactics that might keep alive the idea and work of a particular sort of environmental education: not education as indoctrination but education as the ongoing, lively practice of restoring relationality, deepening curiosity and caring for the ever-emerging, unfolding possibilities of life in the face of authoritarian extractivisms of whatever political hue (Amsler & Facer, 2017; Facer, 2016; Oliveira, 2025). In so doing, we state our commitment to education as a transgressive act (Lotz-Sisitka, 2024), oriented toward realising the potential for collective human and more-than-human flourishing, and to environmental education in particular as a practice of relationality, care and solidarity.

In making the case for education as a practice of reweaving the lifeworld, then, we invite readers to explore these principles from a perspective that recognises educators themselves as part of a wider web of action and practice. None of us can do everything. Rather, the invitation we make here is to recognise the many and abundant ways in which we might respond to these challenges, to find those that fit best with our own capabilities and conditions, and to remain in ongoing dialogue and relations of care and support with those working to respond in other ways.

2. The Principles

2.1. Principle 1: Don't Panic (You Are Not Alone)

Authoritarianism tends to claim to speak for 'we the people'. But who are 'the people' and what do they/we want?

One of the effects of the media environment in which we live, both its ownership structures and the way its algorithms work to capture attention (O'Brien, 2023), is that it can be easy to think that the large majority of people actively wish to destroy the natural world and have little care for climate and ecological concerns (Leviston et al., 2013; Miller, 2023).

This first became apparent to us in a research study Keri conducted with Steve Lewandowsky and Ulrich Ecker during the pandemic (Lewandowsky et al., 2021). In it, we asked people three questions: what sort of future they wanted 'after' the pandemic, what they thought other people would want, and what they thought would happen next. The findings were surprising. First, a majority of those we surveyed in the US and the UK wanted a more sustainable, greener, more locally managed future. This was *not* a minority view; 'we', in other words, were not alone. More interesting, however, was the finding that those we surveyed thought that 'other people' would not agree with them, and that these 'others' would prefer a 'back-to-normal/authoritarian' future. When we asked people what they expected to happen next, in fact, they assumed that 'back-to-normal/authoritarian approaches' would be resurgent. When we asked them to tell us their hopes and fears in their own words, what came up again and again was a feeling that 'other people' did not agree with them and were an obstacle to achieving desired goals.

This pattern is visible in other settings, namely, the sense that 'we'—those who care for the environment and nature, who believe in the possibility of more accountable, lively, ecologically viable democracies—are in the minority and that there is an unnamed majority of 'other people' out there who do not agree with us. Last year, working with colleagues at the Swedish Agricultural University SLU, we brought together 50 people from across a wide spectrum of Swedish organisations and interests to talk about the future of food policies and practices (Facer et al., forthcoming). Again, there was broad agreement in the room despite very significant differences in disciplines, organisational positions, cultural identities and representation of different interest groups. But again, there was an uneasy feeling that 'other people' were missing, specifically, those who do not agree with commitments to fairer, more sustainable worlds. There was an assumption that if 'we' all agree with each other, we must be missing voices of resistance from elsewhere.

The political and media landscape we are inhabiting, in other words, is highly successful in making those of us concerned with creating sustainable futures and regenerative livelihoods feel like we are in a minority (Miller, 2023). This is not surprising, given the longstanding investment by fossil fuel companies in public relations and obfuscation (Oreskes & Conway, 2010) and the systematic shifts in media ownership and representation over the last decades (O'Brien, 2023).

But this impression is wrong. Even a simple glance at the Eurobarometer survey (European Commission, 2025), which draws its sample across all EU countries, for example, shows large majorities of the population in favour of nature protection, who have concerns about pollution, who want regulation, and who do not think governments are doing enough. See also (Leviston et al., 2013; Mau et al., 2026).

What these assumptions mean for educators concerned with environmental matters and confronting authoritarian extractivisms, however, is serious. It positions those who are environmentally concerned as virtuous, but ultimately powerless. It offers a basis for grievance politics, but not a politics that would lead to movement building. It means we may look for resistance and disagreement where perhaps we might look for shared desires for healthy, sustainable, viable worlds. Such assumptions can be used as an excuse to keep ambitions small, hopes limited, agency constrained. The perception of being in a minority, in other words, undermines confidence, erodes the desire to make connections and create collective action. It is a great way of disempowering, dividing, distracting.

To pre-empt and unsettle authoritarian extractivism, then, we need to begin to realise that ‘we’ are not alone, that caring for land, for nature, for environment—despite the stories in our media feeds—is not a minority interest, is not an unusual concern. This is not to say everyone agrees on ways and means to respond to this concern, or that we all use the same language. Nor that there are easy responses with no compromises; there will of course be disagreement about how to proceed, there will be a need for politics and debate. The challenge is to listen, to connect, to figure out what lies beneath the seeming disagreements, to get to the core concerns of people around us and find points of alignment (Beckerman, 2023).

Recognising that a majority does give a damn about ‘nature’, about ‘more-than-human lives’, about ‘the environment’, in other words, brings political responsibility. It means looking around and seeing where and how we can make connections with those we thought were not ‘like us’. It means learning to listen, deeply and carefully, to the stories and worries people are sharing. And it means getting better at naming the small minority of interests who *are* actively and pathologically working to divide us and exploit and extract wealth from the lands that we inhabit alongside the beautiful, strange, unruly jumble of other beings (Encinas et al., 2026).

One of the findings from studies of resistance movements in WW2 is that participation in resistance actions was determined in the main not by ideology, but by the simple fact of being asked to join in and being offered a way to contribute.² In other words, don’t panic, stop doomscrolling, you are not alone, go figure out who to collaborate with—they might be in unlikely places.

2.2. Principle 2: Acknowledge Your Own Emotions (Don’t Become Authoritarian Yourself)

Authoritarianism plays with emotions, manipulating fears and hopes, creating a sense of belonging and certainty. So, how do we work with emotions in environmental education?

Two texts provide helpful cautionary perspectives in this area. The first, Kessel & Burke’s ‘Teaching as Terror Management’ draws attention to the risk that teaching (and we would argue that this may be intensified in relation to environmental questions) functions as an immortality project—a way of extending our lives and fighting our fear of death by reproducing ourselves and our opinions in the students we teach (Kessel & Burke, 2018). The second is Nicole Seymour’s ‘Bad Environmentalist’. This draws attention to the link between ‘middle class’ emotions of restraint and guilt and how these translate into the framing of good environmentalism as a practice of virtuous restraint, often associated with conspicuous forms of ‘ethical’ (and expensive) consumption and manifesting itself in a tendency to tell others (often poorer) what they should be doing (Seymour, 2018).

The risks of teaching as terror management or virtue signalling that these two texts point to become particularly salient as educators confront growing authoritarian extractivism. As the risks of society-ending ecological and climate crisis deepen, the temptation to project our own fears onto students and demand that they share ‘our fears’ and adopt ‘our behaviours’ increases. In such an atmosphere, students’ inevitable moments of resistance, boredom or apathy risk being identified as pathological rather than as moments for dialogue, and the tendency to ever-more assertively impose a particular eco-politics in the classroom, as well as the associated risk of teacher burnout and disillusion, intensifies (Giroux & Paul, 2023).

Resisting authoritarian tendencies, in contrast, demands a slowing down, an attention to our own emotions and how they are working on us and on our students (Ojala, 2023), as well as a renewed commitment to the practice and teaching of listening (Facer, 2025). It demands the creation of conditions in which our students can work arguments through for themselves, come to understand what it means to be and become a living being, sit with

difference and uncertainty, and figure out how their own experiences and contributions can find a place in the challenges we collectively face. It demands a courageous commitment to staying with the ‘beautiful risk’ of education (Biesta, 2014), namely that our students will, through education, become themselves.

Many educators are doing this work already. We are inspired by the work of the Common Worlds collective³ and of Black Mountains College⁴, as well as the micro-practices of democratic education in existing disciplines (Payne, 2025). Such anti-authoritarian educational practices show us what becomes possible when students are supported to know themselves as part of a world of other beings, equally unique, equally alive, and equally entitled to autonomy and agency.

Creating such an education, however, demands conditions in which educators themselves can come together to reflect on their own fears and worries, anxieties and emotions, to support each other before they enter the classroom. Resisting authoritarianism in the self, as in the world, demands community and connection.

2.3. Principle 3: Explore Possibilities Beyond the Classroom (Find Allies and Action Elsewhere)

The UN Conference on the Environment in Stockholm 1972 set the agenda for the development of environmental education. Even at that time, however, it was clear that environmental education could not just be something that happens in the classroom. Rather, it was defined as serving ‘the younger generation as well as adults’ and concerned with the wider ‘mass media of communications’ as well as formal education (United Nations, 1972).

This attention to the world beyond the classroom becomes particularly important today, a time when social media is playing a significant role in fuelling and promoting anti-environmental movements and sustaining authoritarian discourses (Nicolosi et al., 2025). The turn to social media as a strategy for countering misinformation, however, may not offer the gains intended. Not least as there is a risk of educators becoming sucked into social media storms rather than cultivating sustained action on the ground. Indeed, as Rödl and colleagues argue, there is a big gap between ‘likes’ online and real-world action (Rödl et al., 2024).

Instead, educators might find inspiration in connecting what is happening in schools and universities with the wider networks of place-based, community-led prefigurative practices that bring together broad alliances to demonstrate what sustainable, equitable societies might look like in practice. The growing Doughnut Economics movement is putting into practice cities designed around sustainable and equitable principles.⁵ The Collective Imagination movement showcases a resurgence of community-led concretely utopian initiatives to translate hopes for better futures into redesigned communities, city squares and institutions.⁶ The much-older Learning Cities movement creates a framework within which democratic community and adult learning to equip citizens for change can be funded and promoted.⁷ Transnational networks also invite the active collaboration of students with action on the ground—such as the Environmental Justice Atlas, which highlights the local movements, often Indigenous-led, that are organising around resistance and protection of land and nature.⁸

Environmental and sustainability education, in other words, can be reconceived as part of the much wider community of those already working together with communities—from community gardens to urban farms, from insulation activists to water defenders—to create the possibility of transformed worlds.

2.4. Principle 4: Work with Hope as Praxis (Not Outcome)

‘To be truly radical’, wrote Raymond Williams, ‘is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing’ (Williams, 2014). Hope that alternatives are possible is an essential

practice of resisting authoritarianism and yet hope can feel difficult at times. So what does it mean to work with hope?

One response is simply to recognise the ontological complexity of the world. Change happens; the world is unpredictable, arising from the inter- and intra-actions of uncountable actors. Complexity and systems theory have, together, disrupted simple accounts of cause and effect (Prigogine, 1980). Actions create ripples, producing unintended interactions and resonances that resist prediction (Barad, 2007). Weird stuff happens, contingency is at least as influential as agency, and so we cannot predict the future (Tsing & Pollman, 2005). Whether for good or for bad, we do not know precisely what is going to happen. And while there is a heron standing patiently watching the river, while foxes infiltrate city gardens, while swallows make it north to south to north each year, while there are young people learning regenerative farming skills in countries with over 60% youth unemployment and while there are all the people who are working to make these things possible all around the world, it is at least equally as necessary to wonder at the sheer bloody-minded resilience of living beings trying to find a path to life, as it is to despair.

A second response is to recognise what has already gone before, to learn from those for whom hope has been a necessary practice and inner conviction. We might turn, for example, to the words of Vaclav Havel. Havel was the leader of the solidarity workers movement in (former) Czechoslovakia under the long years of Soviet rule. He makes a distinction between hope as an outcome and hope as a practice of meaningful work. He argues: 'Hope is not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out' (Havel, 1991, p.181). Ana Dinerstein's work with the social movements of Latin America echoes this, defining hope as 'the art of using knowledge creatively and politically to weave dreams out of misery, against the odds, amidst brutal state violence, endemic poverty, desperate hunger and social devastation' (Dinerstein, 2015).

In other words, hope is not wishful thinking or fantasy. Hope, as David Orr says, 'has its sleeves rolled up' and is realised in practical, everyday work (Orr, 2010). It is intentional, critical, reflexive (Ojala, 2015, 2017) and strengthened by practical action. Hope is not the promise that things will all be fine, but the lively inner question that asks us what it is that makes sense to do at this time, at this place, with our capabilities and with the people around us.

2.5. Principle 5: Proliferate Stories of Change (It's Not All About Heroes)

One of the perils of supporting groups to imagine alternative futures for many years, Keri writes, is that it is possible to get a little jaded when, once again, someone suggests that everything will be fixed by an as-yet-unnamed new technology or by social and ecological collapse leading to enlightenment and regret for former ways. And we cannot feel anything but empathy and heartbreak when we hear people tell stories of transformation that rely almost entirely on keeping working harder and harder, doing the same things we have always done, a narrative that offers the hero/ines no respite and offers little more than a path to burnout.

There is, it sometimes feels, a weird poverty of stories of change to draw upon. After all, change happens all the time, in a million different ways that we seem not to notice:

- *Somewhere, right now, someone is tinkering with a broken bit of kit and incrementally and slowly repairing and remaking it.*
- *Somewhere else a song is being written that opens up new emotions and fires the imagination.*
- *Somewhere else a lawyer is up late at night, refining a legal argument, making the case for a new precedent, opening up a new possibility.*

- *Someone else is writing a new standard for systems that will get deployed in their organisation, doing a bit of what Sophia Parker calls 'boring innovation'.*
- *Someone else is leading a radical, popular education class.*
- *Someone else is on a rite of passage, listening to the land for what might come next.*
- *Someone is protesting, putting their body on the line.*
- *Someone is changing their investment plans, moving their money away from extractivism.*
- *Someone else is inventing a new sort of business.*
- *Someone else is creating a community festival.*
- *Someone else is cooking, caring, tending a garden, sharing their food with those who need it.*

Change is happening everywhere, all the time. There are changes that are made by visible heroes and heroines; there are changes that come with catastrophe, and with new technologies. But there are also the changes that come from plugging away, having conversations, tinkering around, experimenting, trying things out, creating new practices, opening up new pathways, fighting court cases and doing the boring background work of shifting institutions. Change agents are not just protestors and politicians but also artists, medics, engineers, scientists, witnesses, poets, regulators, bureaucrats.

As biologist and philosopher Andreas Weber wrote, we are less like heroes and warriors and 'more like a tiny universe, tumbling extravagantly through life' (Fremeux & Jordan, 2021, p. 13). Indeed, maybe new metaphors are needed; perhaps our ways of making change are more like swarm intelligence—collective action, horizontality, replaceability, leaderlessness (Kaldor & Selchow, 2013). We may be acting in emergent conditions, with collective outcomes and consequences unpredictable as we intra-act with others (Barad, 2007).

These models of change are radically different from stories of individual heroism—it is time to let those old stories go. We do not, in other words, all have to be Greta Thunberg or Wangari Maathai to change the world or challenge power. We do need to work everywhere, many of us, all at once. Proliferating our stories of change helps us to see what is already happening.

2.6. Principle 6: Nurture Alternatives (Take Care of What Is Already Growing)

Each of us has only so much attention and agency. None of us is all-powerful and gifted with endless resources for action. This means we need to be careful about what we spend our energy on. If we spend 99% of our precious resources of energy on simply describing and pointing out what is wrong, then we risk not saving enough time and energy and attention to take care of and grow alternatives when we see them.

Given that one of the skills of authoritarian politicians is to suggest that 'there is no alternative', this emphasis on diagnosis rather than creation may be a problem (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2015). Our job, then, as heterodox economists JK Gibson-Graham argue, is to pay attention to and proliferate the alternatives so that all around us, everywhere, different ways of living and growing and relating and being and learning and connecting might be nurtured (Gibson-Graham, 2008). It is to work in what Bill Sharpe and others call 'the second horizon', the space of emergence and innovation, and to tend to those things that are growing that offer seeds of new possibilities (Sharpe et al., 2016).

And indeed, the alternatives are everywhere. If you cannot see them, refer to principle 3—get out more. At the very least—read different newspapers, make friends with farmers, engineers, designers, makers, artists (in particular) and poets. Find geeks. Cultivate eccentric friends. Go looking. Once you look, you will find them. Take time to listen to each other as you work out your different aims and objectives, figure out where you overlap, work out where the differences are (Beckerman, 2023). There are tools to help here—from psychological advice on interpersonal relationships (Brooks, 2023), to advice

from the practice of sitting in council (Zimmerman & Coyle, 1996) to practical guidance on designing different sorts of conversations (Aarts, 2015; Zeldin, 1998) to insights into how to listen differently (Lipari, 2014). Then figure out what your own skills are and how to help, replicate, communicate, platform, share and learn from these seeds of other possibilities.

2.7. Principle 7: Name and Protect Gains (Don't Forget What Has Already Been Achieved)

The present is far from perfect. Given this, it can be easy to talk about what we have not achieved, to tell the simple story again and again that schooling, or society, or the ways we organise our lives are inadequate compared to what we need to achieve. That is one of the problems with the idea of progress—eyes are always on the next prize, the next goal, on what we have not got/done/achieved. The risk here is that we do not look behind us; we take for granted what has been achieved, and we miss seeing how easily what we thought we had secured might be dismantled.

To prevent this, we need to both name and protect what has been gained. We need to tell the story of successes, of gains hard-won. We need to tell the story of what it took to build the successes we take for granted today—the otters back in rivers, the ozone layer restored, the red kites flying over Welsh hills, the desert lands returned to green forests. And we need to remember that we will have to keep doing this again and again, that there is no simple line of progress, that there are no battles finished once and for all. Rather, we are in a constant, ongoing struggle to create and recreate possibility.

This means two things: archiving and defending.

- Archiving: We need to get better at creating and protecting archives of environmental protection and care. Shifting baseline syndrome is a real thing, not only in forgetting what we have lost, but in forgetting what we have gained and secured. Archives help us to remember where we have been and what it took.⁹ As generations of environmental and sustainability educators move towards retirement and beyond, new generations need to learn, listen, ask questions about what has been gained. History, particularly oral history, needs to be as much a part of environmental education as systems thinking and anticipation.
- Defending: We need to get better at recognising, understanding and defending the legal rights and structures that protect educators' freedoms to teach environmental education. Institutions from university unions and senates to children's commissioners may become a critical factor in whether the rights to teach environmental and sustainability education in schools and universities are defended. In authoritarian contexts, the law can be an important buffer against political interference.

Tony Judt, the brilliant historian, describes, in *Ill Fares the Land*, precisely the long slow process of creating a welfare state, its rights and expectations and what it takes to achieve them and maintain them in changing times (Judt, 2011). Creating the environmental protections that we have today, however imperfect; creating consensus around climate change; developing the growing collective public understanding that new ways of living and being are required—all of these took time, care, effort and struggle. Such struggles were not always successful, but they happened. While we may mourn what has been lost and what is at risk, we must also tell the stories of what was achieved, and how, and in so doing, make it clear precisely how hard it will be to bring back if lost.

2.8. Principle 8: Diversify Resources and Tactics (Build Redundancy and Resilience)

Monocultures are vulnerable to change. This is the same with educational practice—in particular in relation to the ways that education is funded and the tactics we use for making change.

Before the full-scale invasion in Ukraine, Russian environmental activists were reliant on international organisations and bodies, such as Greenpeace, the World Wildlife Fund, and the Arctic Council, that were a major source of support in education, research, policy-making and activism. With sanctions and new Russian laws, the partnerships stopped, the funding dried up, and the activists were left alone with no support networks (Obydenkova, 2025). If our institutions rely on either a benign and reasonable state or on a single charitable funder for their existence, they may be vulnerable.

It may be time, then, to start to look for alternative sources of resources at a time when funding may be radically slashed. Universities and schools will not be protected; indeed, they will likely be targeted (as we have seen in the US). Under these conditions, how might resilient teaching and learning institutions be created? These are questions that individuals and organisations need to be working on now¹⁰. The Open Source movement offers a useful model, distributing knowledge and information across multiple sites and sourcing funding in a distributed manner.¹¹

Equally, if educators rely on only one form of protest to achieve our political goals, we are missing a trick. While we love a street protest as much as the next person, the sustainability of authoritarian regimes relies on a strong security apparatus and the loyalty of elites to the leadership and not on democratic participation or public support (Etkind, 2017; Zygar, 2019). Traditional forms of protest such as street marches or speaking out against politics and policies become, in these contexts, not just less effective, but both dangerous and ways of flushing out resistance.

As educators confront the possibility that democratic public protest may be criminalised and shut down, other tactics and practices are required that build strength and resilience and keep possibilities open: more subtle work perhaps, that does not rely on the spectacular satisfaction of the street protest but on sustained collaboration and trusted networks working to make change in playful and creative ways (Bergman & Montgomery, 2017; Popovic & Miller, 2015).

2.9. Principle 9: Practice Simple Sabotage

All of the above principles are to some extent pre-emptive. They assume an authoritarian state is not yet upon us. This is not the case for many educators working in places as diverse as India, the US and, in 2025, Hungary. Indeed, as we know from the US, where climate and ecological concerns increasingly cannot speak their name, it is eminently possible that environmental educators may find themselves working in institutions—universities, civil service, schools—where talking about and working on climate justice and environmental questions is formally and informally policed and constrained.¹²

Under these circumstances, other tactics are necessary. We draw inspiration here from a booklet produced by the CIA in 1944 as a guide for the resistance in occupied Europe during WW2 (Office of Strategic Services, 1944). This guide to ‘simple sabotage’ was shared with Keri by Pablo Suarez, the much-missed humanitarian activist who worked tirelessly at the heart of large institutions like the UNFCCC and the Red Cross, with humour and an eye for the absurd, to try to make serious change. While the booklet is, in the main, focused on disrupting supplies of material resources and critical infrastructure, it also included a guide to disrupting the smooth flowing of ‘occupying institutions’, and as such, might be usefully applied to educational institutions suffering from authoritarian capture. The guide suggested, for example and amongst other things, that one:

- *Insist on doing everything through ‘channels’. Never permit short-cuts to be taken in order to expedite decisions.*
- *Make ‘speeches’. Talk as frequently as possible and at great length. Illustrate your ‘points’ by long anecdotes and accounts of personal experience.*

- *When possible refer all matters to committees for 'further study and consideration'. Attempt to make committees as large as possible.*
- *Bring up irrelevant issues as frequently as possible.*
- *Haggle over precise wordings.*
- *Refer back to matters decided upon at the last meeting and attempt to re-open the question of the advisability of that decision.*
- *Advocate 'caution'. Be 'reasonable', avoid haste.*
- *Be worried about the propriety of any decision.*
- *Demand written orders.*
- *Misunderstand orders.*
- *Insist on perfect work in relatively unimportant products, send back for finishing those which have the least flaws.*
- *Be pleasant to inefficient workers, give them undeserved promotions. Discriminate against efficient workers.*
- *Hold conferences when there is more critical work to be done.*
- *Apply all regulations to the last letter.*

These recommendations are both unintentionally humorous and deadly serious; they present possibilities for safe action in conditions where protest and overt politics may be dangerous and can be enacted everywhere from school meetings to university governance boards. They can be deployed in pretty much any organisational context without drawing significant attention.

Of course, reading these recommendations also begs the question of whether some of our existing institutions are not, at times, already sabotaging themselves; indeed, they invite some self-reflection on whether we as educators and researchers are already complicit in sustaining dysfunctional practices that militate against meaningful ecological and social action. How many more conferences do we need? What sort of journal system and publishing process would actually drive meaningful thought, action and research? When is the language we use serving precision and when simply comfortably delaying action? Indeed, this strange little book invites reflection on the sorts of regulation and bureaucratic processes that would in fact be necessary to support and sustain transgressive education oriented toward life, relationality and collective thriving.

2.10. Principle 10: See the Bigger Picture (Practice Solidarity with Those Who Have Been Doing This for a While)

The temporality of authoritarian extractivism is not universal. For some it is on the horizon, seen as a future threat; for others, it is a long-existing reality from which communities and whole nations have suffered for generations (Nixon, 2011; Sutoris, 2022). In some settings it is on the rise; in others, it is being weakened (Hungary in 2026 is a case in point). What happens in one place, however, acts as a blueprint for others; as the military policing of the DAPL pipeline teaches us, authoritarian extractivism learns rapidly and deploys its insights around the world (Estes, 2019).

So too, for environmental educators, the response to authoritarian extractivism cannot be seen as a national or even regional project. Local actions need to be connected, and transnational networks forged of solidarity and mutual support. Such networks, however, will demand a reckoning and recognition with the different temporalities of such violence, of our sometimes complicity, particularly for those of us working in Europe, with the historic and ongoing outsourcing of extractivism to 'elsewhere'. We will need to learn, in other words, to show up with humility and solidarity, not entitlement. Learning to do so can be hard work, but there is guidance—not least in the practices of groups like the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective¹³.

2.11. Principle 11: Don't Forget the Dancing

And finally, creating the conditions for an environmentally and socially sustainable world is not going to happen overnight, and it is unlikely to be easy as political headwinds strengthen. Under these circumstances, it may be useful to remember the reason that environmental and sustainability education matters (at least to us). Namely, that we are working towards the possibility of conditions in which humans can learn to notice and respond to the diverse, complicated, abundant beauty of each other and of the other beings who co-inhabit the world we inhabit. Our purpose, in other words, is not bleak but beautiful. Which means that our day-to-day lives, our practices, and our work too, need to be beautiful, not bleak.

Albie Sachs, the great legal activist, talking to the African National Congress in 1989 on the verge of the end of Apartheid, offered a clear warning against forgetting the joys and beauty of life:

'there is nothing the Apartheid rulers would like more than to convince us that because apartheid is ugly, the world is ugly. ANC members are full of fun and romanticism and dreams, we enjoy and wonder at the beauties of nature and the marvels of human creation, yet if you look at most of our art and literature you would think we were living in the greyest and most sombre of all worlds, completely shut in by apartheid. It is as though our rulers stalk every page and haunt every picture; everything is obsessed by the oppressors and the trauma they have imposed. Listen in contrast to the music of Hugh Masekela, of Abdullah Ibrahim, of Jonas Gwangwa, of Miriam Makeba, and you are in a universe of wit and grace and vitality and intimacy, there is invention and modulation of mood, ecstasy and sadness; this is a cop-free world in which the emergent personality of our people manifests itself' (Sachs, 1998).

The work we do as educators now is not (just) 'ethical' work; it is, in Arne Næss's terms, 'beautiful action'; it is a movement towards creation and possibility, love and relationship. And these qualities need to be part of how we live and act alongside the hard and difficult work; without this, what are we making?

Anarchist educator and activist Emma Goldman made this point in a different way in 1931:

'at the dances I was one of the most untiring and gayest. One evening a cousin of Sasha, a young boy, took me aside. With a grave voice, as if he were about to announce the death of a dear comrade, he whispered to me that it did not behoove an agitator to dance. Certainly not with such reckless abandon, anyway. It was undignified for one who was on the way to become a force in the anarchist movement. My frivolity would only hurt the Cause. I grew furious at the impudent interference of the boy. I told him to mind his own business. I was tired of having the Cause constantly thrown into my face. I did not believe that a Cause which stood for a beautiful ideal, for anarchism, for release and freedom from convention and prejudice, should demand the denial of life and joy. I insisted that our Cause could not expect me to become a nun and that the movement would not be turned into a cloister. If it meant that, I did not want it' (Golding, 1931, p. 41).

This paragraph would, in the 1970s, be turned into a feminist slogan emblazoned on a T-shirt—'if your revolution doesn't have dancing, I don't want it'.

We are in these political struggles for the long haul. In the ongoing long-term resistance required to authoritarianism in service of a diverse, thriving, abundant lifeworld, we will need all the joy and dancing (or whatever quiet pleasures might suit you) we can get. We will need it to keep us going, and we will need it because otherwise, what are we doing any of this for, if not for an abundant life for all, with all the qualities, beauty and joy of music.

Nearly 30 years ago, Keri remembers, her first piece of empirical research was a study of why people dance. In Glasgow she visited ceilidhs and salsa classes, ballet lessons and night clubs, and one memory stays with her: as she was spun across the floor of Partick Community Hall at the Thursday afternoon tea dance by an 85-year-old with light in his eyes, he said, ‘We danced through the depression, we danced through the war, we danced through the thatcher years, I don’t know how you youngsters do without it, dancing is what reminds me I am alive’.

If we want to respond to authoritarianism extractivism, we will need our dancing shoes; we will need to remember the joys of what it means to be alive, amongst others, in the world.

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Notes

- ¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mr_Nobody_Against_Putin (accessed on 8 July 2026).
- ² This is an argument presented by Rutger Bregman in his Reith Lectures on Moral Revolution here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m002n0jf> (accessed on 8 July 2026).
- ³ <https://www.commonworlds.net/> (accessed on 8 July 2026).
- ⁴ <https://blackmountainscollege.uk/study/higher-education/> (accessed on 8 July 2026).
- ⁵ <https://doughnuteconomics.org/about-doughnut-economics> (accessed on 8 July 2026).
- ⁶ <https://www.collectiveimagination.tools/> (accessed on 8 July 2026).
- ⁷ <https://www.uil.unesco.org/en/learning-cities> (accessed on 8 July 2026).
- ⁸ Environmental Justice Atlas: <https://ejatlas.org/> (accessed on 8 July 2026).
- ⁹ This piece points to the contribution of a number of different archives in working against authoritarian practices: <https://europeanmemories.net/magazine/activating-archives-against-revisionism-denialism-and-propaganda/> (accessed on 8 July 2026).
- ¹⁰ One useful model for collective action here is the Long Revolution blog, run by Chris Newfield, which is mobilising around and against cuts to critical voices and the humanities in US universities. It offers a practical, grounded insight into the questions of resourcing in education. <https://utotherescue.blogspot.com/> (accessed on 8 July 2026).
- ¹¹ <https://wikimediafoundation.org/news/2025/11/26/how-is-wikipedia-funded/> (accessed on 8 July 2026).
- ¹² See Transparency.org report: <https://www.transparency.org/en/blog/speaking-out-to-protect-the-planet> (accessed on 8 July 2026).
- ¹³ <https://decolonialfutures.net/portfolio/anti-assholism-memo/> (accessed on 8 July 2026).

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