
Seminar on Schools, Universities and the Environment: welcoming address

The Honourable Allan J. Blinken

Ambassador of the United States of America
to Belgium

On 16 April 1997, in the presence of His Royal Highness Prince Laurent of Belgium, The Honourable Allan J. Blinken welcomed the participants at the start of the International Seminar on Environmental Care and Environmental Management Systems in Schools and Universities with the following opening address:

Your Royal Highness, distinguished experts and guests, ladies and gentlemen:

On 22 April we celebrate Earth Day all around the world. At this promising time of year, as a new growing season begins, we are reminded again of the blessings and bounties of nature. Also at this time, we remind ourselves that we each have a responsibility to safeguard the Earth that protects, nourishes and sustains us.

This sense of responsibility for our planet – this sense of stewardship – does not just happen. It must be fostered and promoted. It can be lost, as it was during much of the western Industrial Revolution. And it can be rediscovered, as it was by the activists and visionaries who first established Earth Day in 1970. For this reason, it is essential that we teach the next generation of young men and women to respect the Earth, and to understand their environment. The future of our planet depends on it.

This seminar on 'Schools, Universities and the Environment' brings together some of the latest thinking on environmental education from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. It provides an opportunity to share ideas and exchange views on how we can best communicate environmental values and understanding. I thank the organizers at the Free University of Brussels, and congratulate them on the initiative and hard work they have demonstrated in bringing this conference together. I am proud and pleased that the United States Embassy in Belgium has been a key sponsor of this event. Our support underscores the importance we attach to environmental issues, and the value we see in a broader transatlantic dialogue with our partners in Europe.

The United States under the Clinton Administration has placed a new emphasis on environmental and global issues. To give just one example, the Secretary of State last year issued instructions to all US ambassadors overseas to ensure that environmental issues are placed in the mainstream of our country's foreign diplomacy. I am determined to see that this happens here in Belgium.

We are already making good progress:

- US Embassy staff and Belgian officials consult regularly on a wide range of environmental policy matters of international importance, such as ozone depletion, climate change, sustainable development and nuclear safety.

- We have supported – and will continue to support – environmental seminars and symposia such as today’s. We regularly disseminate environmental policy papers and analytical think-pieces from the United States to a wide range of Belgian opinion-makers and experts. And we continue to sponsor cultural exchange visits with a focus on many possible topics, including the environment.
- In the area of environmental education, Belgian high school students are already participating actively with students from the United States and around the world in the exciting and innovative program on Global Learning and Observations to Benefit the Environment – GLOBE. Initiated by Vice President Al Gore in 1994, GLOBE is a truly worldwide science and education program. Over 3200 schools in 44 countries are taking part. The GLOBE program encourages students to make hands-on observations of environmental conditions near their school: weather conditions, water temperature and chemistry, land cover, soil characteristics, and so on. They then share the data with other students and with scientists by means of the Internet.

Last year I had the chance to visit Belgium’s first GLOBE school, a secondary school in Tienen. I saw first-hand the students’ excitement and enthusiasm as they collected their samples, made their measurements, analysed their data, and communicated their findings to others through the GLOBE website. Clearly, they were gaining a sophisticated understanding of environmental science and ecological principles – not to mention computer, mathematics and foreign-language skills. It seemed to me that they were learning much more than what they would have gained from a traditional curriculum. I look forward to GLOBE’s continued expansion throughout Belgium.

Just as we in the United States are giving new impetus to environmental issues, important new steps are being taken in Belgium:

- A new co-ordinating committee is now in place to ensure a unified and co-ordinated Belgian position on international environmental issues, even though, constitutionally, responsibility for environmental policy is divided between federal and regional governments.
- Belgium recently appointed a roving ‘Green Ambassador’ to represent the country forcefully and effectively at important multilateral negotiations on the environment.
- Many environmental reforms are being adopted and implemented here within the context of European Union policies and directives.
- On the educational front, there are exciting new ideas such as the pioneering Green School project, about which you will hear later today. The Green School and GLOBE approaches seem to be naturally complementary and mutually reinforcing. I hope you will consider the possibilities for synergy.

With Earth Day almost here, newly reminded of the environmental challenges and the opportunities before us, we can all agree on the importance of today’s discussion on progress and innovations in environmental education. But this conference is also significant in another sense. In December 1995, President Clinton and President Santer signed an agreement – the New Transatlantic Agenda – to strengthen the ties between the United States and the European Union. One of the goals of the New Transatlantic Agenda is the reinforcement of exchanges and people-to-people contact on a range of issues. Your presence and participation here today is thus not only an expression of our commitment

and concern about the environment, it also exemplifies – and contributes to – the new spirit of co-operation and friendship extending across the Atlantic Ocean between our nations.

For all the reasons I have mentioned, it gives me great pleasure to welcome you to this seminar on 'Schools, Universities and the Environment'. I wish you a productive and stimulating meeting. I look forward to your conclusions and recommendations, and – most importantly – to the concrete actions that will result from your deliberations.

The conference opened with an introduction by His Royal Highness Prince Laurent of Belgium, President of K.I.N.T.