Rethinking the Talloires Declaration

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**Abstract:**

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Rethinking the Talloires Declaration

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Abstract

Purpose
The purpose of this article is to critique constructively and complement the Talloires Declaration with a focus on social and cultural elements that shape action. These elements are important to achieving the needed response to the environmental issues that the Talloires Declaration highlights. While the Talloires Declaration has been significant and successful in a number of ways, it does not make clearly visible the social conditioning that - beyond information and knowledge about issues - has such a determining influence on action and environmental literacy.

Approach
In this article the action and change the Talloires Declaration seeks to achieve is considered against a backdrop of selected social theory and education for sustainability literature. This literature provides insights on the social change that is part of bringing about environmental improvement.

Findings
Patterns of thinking and acting that determine whether action on the environment is taken, an important aspect of environmental literacy, are on the whole determined intersubjectively and reside in perspectives and orientations that are largely tacit. Guidance to university staff to achieve the aims of the Talloires Declaration should keep in focus the need for transformation of social and cultural conditioning and entrenched, unquestioned perspectives and ways of being that strongly influence student and staff action. Staff committed to sustainability will want to consider modes through which such transformation can be fostered.
Originality/value
For those concerned with the Talloires Declaration, this article offers considerations important in orienting universities’ responses to urgent environmental issues. Few articles have proposed that this foundational document for university commitments to sustainability needs to be rethought with the benefit of passing time and in view of a wider, and largely subsequent, literature.

Introduction
To sign the Talloires Declaration (1990) is considered a major signal of a university’s commitment toward sustainability (Wright, 2010; 2002; Davidson, 2010; Calder and Dautremont-Smith, 2009; Beringer et al., 2008; AASHE, 2008; Moore, 2005a; Shriberg and Tallent 2003; Shriberg, 2002; Walton, 2000; Walton et al., 2000; Walton et al., 1997; Bekessy 2002; DeAngelis, 2009). As of October 2010, 429 universities around the globe were signatories to the Talloires Declaration, (University Leaders for a Sustainable Future, ULSF -a, n.d.), with 25 universities having signed in 2009 (ULSF-b, n.d.). Even after twenty years, it remains a commitment that is considered sufficiently current and worthwhile to sign. The Talloires Declaration still figures centrally in the policy documents of many universities and signing the Declaration is one of four indicators of ‘sustainability initiatives’ used in a recent assessment of universities in the United States (DeAngelis, 2009). Signing the Declaration also serves as a form of internal and external communication of a university’s commitment to action.

The Talloires Declaration begins with a statement of deep concern for a number of forms of environmental degradation that “threaten the survival of humans and thousands of other living species” (http://www.ulsf.org/talloires_declaration.html). These environmental problems are attributed to “inequitable and unsustainable production and consumption patterns that aggravate poverty in many regions of the world”. The Talloires Declaration states that urgent action is needed to reverse these trends and create “an equitable and sustainable future for all humankind”. It asserts that universities must play a major role in ecological restoration and in the adoption of environmentally sound industrial and agricultural technologies. University leaders have the responsibility, according to the Declaration, to mobilize internal and external resources to ensure that their institutions respond to the challenge.

The points from the Talloires Declaration summarized thus far form a Preamble to a statement of ten actions that the signatories agree to take. These actions include commitments to work with internal and external stakeholders, to work with schools, to take cross-disciplinary approaches, to develop the ability of staff to teach environmental literacy, to set an example of resource
conservation, to establish programs to produce expertise in relevant fields, and to raise awareness in internal and external fora of the need for action. One phrase is repeated in the Preamble, and in the list of agreed actions, with slight variations and hence serves as a sort of core expression about the responsibility of universities to sustainability through “education, research, policy formation, and information exchange” (Preamble, Action 2 & Action 6). In all, the Talloires Declaration is only just over 500 words long.

The Talloires Declaration had been preceded by a number of conferences, declarations and research groups and programs on the environment (Wright, 2002; Caldwell, 1990; Sauvé et al., 2007). These include the:

- 1948 establishment of the International Union for the Protection of Nature (IUPN) (later became the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) and then the World Conservation Union);
- 1962-1972 International Biological Programme (ecological research);
- 1968 Biosphere Conference - “the first intergovernmental forum to discuss and promote what is now called ‘sustainable development’” (UNESCO, 1993, p. 4);
- 1969 establishment of the Man and the Biosphere (MAB) research programme (as a result of the Biosphere Conference) (UNESCO, 1993);
- 1972 Stockholm - United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, leading to the formation of the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP);
- 1975 Belgrade Workshop and Charter on Environmental Education;
- 1977 Tbilisi Intergovernmental Conference and Declaration on Environmental Education;
- 1980 World Conservation Strategy (prepared by the IUCN);
- 1987 Moscow Environmental Training and Education Congress, leading to the International Strategy for Action in the Field of Environmental Education and Training in the 1990s;
- 1987 Our Common Future (‘Brundtland Report’) – The World Commission on Environment and Development

While some of these addressed education and even higher education (UNESCO, 1988), the Talloires Declaration was the first international declaration by university presidents on their institutions’ responsibilities to respond to the world’s environmental situation (Wright, 2004; Bekessy, 2002). Approximately two years after the Talloires Declaration, the ‘Earth Summit’ (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development) was held in Rio de Janeiro. This resulted in Agenda 21, which laid out a program for all levels of education in Chapter 36, including objectives for reorienting education towards sustainable development. This did not, however, arise from a gathering of university leaders nor have the focus on tertiary education of the Talloires Declaration.
While visionary, the Talloires Declaration is also, of course, a product of its time. As part of the collaborative efforts among the world’s universities to address the environmental crises noted in the Declaration, it is worth taking a constructively critical perspective on the Declaration twenty years on. Such a perspective is taken in this article, while remembering the good that the Talloires Declaration has achieved, for example in giving legitimacy and internal leverage for university staff members committed to sustainability or in lending weight to proposals to lessen a university’s environmental impact.

In this article, consideration is given to assumptions and possible gaps in the Talloires Declaration and aspects of what is actually required to bring about change and to lessen the environmental problems highlighted therein. It is telling that the Talloires Declaration does not include the word ‘social’ and does not make visible the social/cultural dimensions of change that will be a part of achieving its goals. It lends weight to the perception that the Talloires Declaration was formed with a somewhat uncritical acceptance of, or orientation to, the historical tendency to confuse knowing about issues with actually enacting solutions to them. The distinction between environmental education about the environment and environmental education for the environment was first made as early as the 1970s (Robottom 1984) and has been used often in the literature. In relation to environmental literacy, the Talloires Declaration seems to fall more into the category of education about the environment.

While Action 4 of the Talloires Declaration aims to “Foster environmental literacy for all”, what is meant by ‘environmental literacy’ can be interpreted by the use of the phrase “environmentally literate” in Action 3: “Establish programs to produce expertise in environmental management, sustainable economic development, population, and related fields to ensure that all university graduates are environmentally literate...” This suggests that environmentally literacy is defined in relation to expertise in “environmental management, sustainable economic development, population, and related fields”. None of these highlight the personal and interpersonal or cultural dimensions of change.

The fact that the focus of the Talloires Declaration in relation to elementary schools is on encouraging the “capacity for interdisciplinary teaching about population, environment, and sustainable development” (Action 8) also does not make clear the social dimensions of environmental problems. The ‘International Strategy for Action in the Field of Environmental Education and Training in the 1990s’ (UNESCO-UNEP, 1988, p. 6, para. 14) states, “it falls to EE [environmental education] to supply... the means of perceiving and understanding the various biological, physical, social, economic and cultural factors which interact in time and space to shape
the environment...”. The International Strategy also states (p. 18, para. 119) that students and professionals need to learn that “environmental problems and their solutions are not solely of a technical but largely of a human nature, involving social, cultural, ethical and economic values.” The Talloires Declaration makes no reference to values or to the affective dimensions of students. It does not acknowledge that the social or political sciences have a role to play in understanding and resolving environmental problems/crises.

The orientation of the Talloires Declaration to ‘knowledge about’ issues might be seen as reflecting an objectivist, scientistic paradigm that has received much criticism both in general (for example, Feyerabend, 1970; Habermas, 1971; 1987; 2003; MacIntyre, 1981, Bernstein, 1983; Toulmin, 1988; Dryzek, 1990) and in particular for its adequacy in relation to solutions for environmental problems (Robottom and Hart, 1993; Huckle, 1993; Sterling, 2004; Meppem and Bourke, 1999; O'Donoghue and Lotz-Sisitka, 2002). Some authors even suggest that technical scientific approaches in environmental education may in fact embody perspectives that perpetuate environmental problems (Robottom, 1987; Huckle, 1991; Fien et al., 1993; Meppem and Bourke, 1999; Bawden, 2004).

Other higher education sustainability commitments have emerged since the Talloires Declaration, such as the 1991 Halifax Declaration, the 1993 Kyoto Declaration, the 1993 COPERNICUS University Charter for Sustainable Development, the 1993 Swansea Declaration of the Association of Commonwealth Universities, and the 2001 Lüneburg Declaration on Higher Education for Sustainability. Amongst these, there is some more explicit mention of social sciences, values and reflection on norms. Still, the Talloires Declaration is a major reference point in many universities’ policies and the only international declaration on the environment that many universities have made, so it is worth reflecting on enhancements to its message that may assist signatory universities in achieving its ends. Also, while many institutions have further developed their conception of their commitment to sustainability beyond the Talloires Declaration, the Declaration in its current form can be regarded by staff - as with a senior administrator at my university - as a primary representation of what the university is attempting to achieve.

In the following sections, I firstly assert the centrality of action to environmental literacy. I then discuss cultural, intersubjective and other factors that play such a large role in a person’s disposition and whether they take action on environmental problems. These conditioning influences are often tacit, unnoticed aspects of a person’s way of thinking, acting and relating and can even be embedded in the person’s bodily senses. Finally, I touch on considerations that can facilitate a transformative approach to EE/Efs.
Not just ‘knowing about’ but action

What is important with a commitment to sustainability is action, not just knowing information or the science related to an issue. It is change that is needed, not just knowledge. St Clair (2003, p. 71) states that environmental education “must lead to action to be considered effective”. In a national review of environmental education and its contribution to sustainability in Australia, Tilbury and Cooke (2005), define environmental education, or ‘learning for sustainability’, as leading to action and change. Robottom (1984) notes the importance of action in his discussion of the difference between education for the environment and education about or in the environment. The Australian National Action Plan for environmental education (Department of Environment and Heritage, 2000, p. 4) states that, “One of the most fundamental defining characteristics of effective environmental education is that it must lead to actions which result in better environmental outcomes, not simply the accumulation of inert knowledge or impractical skills”.

Much has been written about the ‘gap’ between knowledge and action

A parade of publications from before the time of the Talloires Declaration to more recent years has strongly emphasized that information and knowledge do not necessarily lead to action on the environment. From the work of authors such as Robottom (1984; 1987), Finger (1989) and Milbrath (1989) in the 1980s, before the publication of the Talloires Declaration, to Tilbury (1995), Beck (1995), Lenzen (1997), Russell and Ison (2000), Tilbury and Cooke (2005), and Thomas (2009), the assumption that more information will result in better action has been found to be flawed or very questionable. Fien (2003, p. 14) notes “among the most successful programmes are those that avoid the belief that awareness leads to understanding, understanding leads to concern, and concern motivates the development of skills and action”.

The problems with the assumption of the connection between knowledge and action have been so widely recognized that the topic was the focus of a special issue of the journal Environmental Education Research (Vol. 8, No. 3, 2002). One article in that special issue summed up this recognition, noting, “Numerous theoretical frameworks have been developed to explain the gap between the possession of environmental knowledge and environmental awareness, and displaying pro-environmental behaviour” (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002, p. 239).

As perspectives on ‘environmental education’ have changed to emphasize the importance of action and social change to improve environmental situations, different expressions such as ‘education for sustainable development’, ‘education for sustainability’ and ‘sustainable education’ have been used (Tilbury and Wortman, 2004; Tilbury and Cooke, 2005; Sterling 2004). While the notions underlying
these changes are contested (Jickling, 1992; Ferriera, 2009), there has been a general shift away from the expression ‘environmental education’. For the purpose of simplicity, in this article I will use the abbreviation EE/EfS to embrace environmental education, education for sustainability, education for sustainable development and other similar expressions.

**What forms action?**
If action is such a critical aspect of EE/EfS that addresses the issues identified in the Talloires Declaration, then what forms action? Actions emerge from a complex combination of elements and influences. Rather than simply being determined by information and cognitive knowledge, actions are a product of emotions, values, norms and networks of interactions. These include patterns of relating and ways of thinking, sense of identity and a sense of what is possible and worthwhile to do. These subjective personal elements, which are so important to whether (and what) action is taken, are formed intersubjectively, that is, in relation with others and their subjectivity (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1999; Shotter, 1993a; 1993b; Cunliffe, 2008; Habermas, 1987; Yanow, 2006). Similarly, the subjectivity of these others is largely formed in relationships and this process is framed or shaped by institutions and the assumptions embedded within them; hence there are traditions or histories of influences that determine whether or not action is taken.

While the individual at any given point may feel her decision on action is determined by her goals and what she values, these subjective goals and values are formed largely through socialisation. Many of the influences on action are embedded in the practices in which the person participates, in taken for granted assumptions, interpretive categories, and senses of norms (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1999; Shotter, 1993a; Cunliffe, 2008; Habermas, 1987; Wenger, 1998). Beck (1995, p. 45) points out that knowledge of “ecological despoliation” does not equate to action, as "cultural dispositions to perceive" and "cultural norms" decide which despoliations are tolerated and which are not: “acceptance of the unacceptable arises and persists against a background of unquestioned assumptions”. The reader of the Talloires Declaration does not get a sense of the crucial role that these norms and interpretive categories play in the real sustainability actions and outcomes of students, staff and citizens.

An early ‘constructionist’ work provides insights into how norms and perceptions are formed. In their seminal work *The social construction of reality*, Berger and Luckmann (1966) describe the social, intersubjective influence in terms of schemes of ‘typification’, or the categories by which we typify or interpret things and circumstances. Patterns of interaction form with reference to these schemes of interpretive categories. These patterns and categories constitute social structure and are generally taken for granted by members of society and included in their sense of reality (Berger and
Such taken-for-granted schemes are an orientation for action, interaction and interpretation. Schatzki (2002) similarly acknowledges the interpersonal structuring of subjective interpretive categories.

Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 1998) asserts that the structures of society are imprinted upon and reflected in our internal structures. That is, external social and institutional structures have a shaping influence upon our internal, personal structures of thinking, feeling and even bodily sensing (see also Gergen, 1999). “It is because the body has become a repository of ingrained dispositions that certain actions, certain ways of behaving and responding [or not responding], seem altogether natural” (Thompson, 1991, p. 13). Taylor (2001) discusses compelling evidence from neurobiology of conditioned patterns of action being stored below conscious awareness in the body. The importance of the profound and tacit shaping of individual dispositions by social and institutional contexts needs to be highlighted to those who would act on the commitments of the Talloires Declaration.

Even the “production and consumption patterns” to which the Talloires Declaration attributes environmental degradation, have imprinted themselves on our thinking, our collective and individual world view, our sense of self, our ways of relating and the culture of what we do and how we do things. As Habermas (1971) discusses, patterns of work are key elements of social patterns. Patterns of production and consumption form cognitive patterns and are important in the constitution of identity. Thus initiatives to change production and consumption patterns may come up against deeply ingrained senses of what feels normal and right.

Of course, these patterns also have a material dimension that needs to be considered. The patterns of social and economic life become incorporated (or institutionalised) into material circumstances, which then ‘prefigure’ further social activities, thinking and interactions (Wilkinson et al., 2009). For example, the existence of highways prefigures the options for practices of transportation and the existence of a power grid that links homes to coal-fired power stations prefigures choices about energy and energy use. When people set out to change the more human-based dimensions of social/cultural patterns, they still have to contend with the continuing shaping of practice by material circumstances.

Change to the patterns of thought and culture (and patterns of material arrangements) is resisted in particular by those who are most privileged (in terms of wealth, power or prestige) by those patterns. But the reproduction of social patterns is also supported by the actions of those who are part of the social web but not necessarily benefitting from it (Bourdieu, 1998; Crossley, 2003), and
even by those who feel dissatisfaction with the negative environmental consequences of the social/economic patterns. “Ultimately we participate in our own subjugation” (Gergen, 1999, p. 39 following Foucault). There are ways that even people who recognise and are knowledgeable about environmental issues may unwittingly be supporting or accepting patterns that are part of the root of the problem. Unless this is acknowledged in a document like the Talloires Declaration, some of the fundamental reasons for the persistence of non-action may be left unaddressed.

If we, as staff, students, and citizens, are to respond well to the environmental crises in our world (as identified in the Talloires Declaration), we need to recognise that we have habits of thought and feeling that we are generally not aware of, and these have been shaped by the values, norms and world views embedded in cultural patterns, institutions and social structures (or, one could say, in ‘practice architectures’: Kemmis and Grootenboer, 2008; Wilkinson et al., 2009). Such influences tend largely to be reproduced through interaction (Szerszynski & Urry, 2010), although they are also continuously reshaped and amended to a degree (consciously and unconsciously) by social actors. Conversation is very important in both reality maintenance and its ongoing modification (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Shotter, 1993a).

A transformative orientation to EE/EfS
The last section highlighted the emotionally and socially embedded nature of a person’s disposition to take particular actions. As definitions of EE/EfS include action, and action is formed by social/cultural/historical conditioning and conditions, what can change the disposition towards action and foster the capacity to facilitate change? If we recognize the crucial need for action to resolve those problems identified in the Talloires Declaration, and we recognize that our action is largely formed by taken-for-granted notions, conditioning (and material conditions), then a transformative orientation to EE/EfS is appropriate.

Transformative learning (Mezirow 1978; 1981; 1991; 1997), which brings to light assumptions underlying perspectives so that they can be modified with conscious consideration, is a valuable focus for EE/EfS (Wals, 2010; Wals and Corcoran, 2006; Moore 2005a; 2005b; Kevany, 2007; Sterling, 2010; O’Sullivan, 2004; Sipos, Battisti and Grimm, 2008; Tilbury, Keogh, Leighton, and Kent, 2005; Tilbury, 2004; Thomas 2009). Transformative learning is fostered through critical discourse group settings (Mezirow, 1981; 1991). Characteristics of such critical discourse settings are a minimization of hierarchical power relations and an atmosphere of mutual support, encouragement and non-judgmental acceptance (Mezirow, 1991; Lund, 2008). An exercise that is often valuable for participants in a reflective discourse group is to build their questioning of habits and assumptions around a vision they develop of a worthwhile shared future (Thomas, 2009; Fien, 2001; Huckle,
In such settings the power of conversation to modify conditioning can be realised in relation to deliberatively formed principles of a worthwhile future.

The collaborative transformative processes described above can help engender ‘reflexivity’. Reflexivity is the capacity to be aware of the assumptions that underlie practices (Blewitt, 2004). It is an important part of transforming the disposition to act or not to act. Gergen (1999, p. 50) writes that ‘constructionists’ - who recognize the social conditioning in our dispositions - celebrate reflexivity, “an unrelenting concern with the blinding potential of the ‘taken-for-granted’”. Cunliffe (2008, p. 132) suggests that reflexivity is an ethical responsibility:

If we believe we are constantly creating meaning, sense and selves as we relate with others, then we need to reflexively surface and articulate how we create these meanings, so that we can act and interact in more responsive and ethical ways.

Reflexivity is complemented by a critical consciousness – an ability to analyse environmental (or other) problems in terms of the broader social, economic and political systems (including the dominant ways of thinking) in which we are enmeshed. Many writers call for understanding the root causes of environmental problems based on such analyses (e.g. Fien et al., 1993; Tilbury, 1995; 2004; St Clair, 2003; Beck, 1995; 1997; Robottom and Hart, 1993; Huckle, 1991; Orr, 1992; Kemmis, 2007; UNESCO, 2002). Tilbury (2004, p. 99) states:

Environmental educators have argued for over a decade that formal and higher education must engage learners in critical reflection – a process needed to interpret the root causes of environmental and development problems, challenge bias, support rational decision-making and to examine personal and political contributions to change (Fien, 1993; Tilbury, 1993; 2001; Huckle, 1996; 1997; Sterling 1996).

There is a significant literature of critical analyses available from scholars who have critiqued many elements of modern society - and modernity itself. These analyses can assist students to see through to inequities and negative consequences of social and historical structures that are often hidden under the veil of normalcy. In arguing the importance of critical reflection to EE/EfS, Tilbury (2004) identifies the work of Habermas in particular. Critical consciousness can assist students to become aware of historically formed ‘pre-understandings’ or ‘prejudices’ (Russell and Ison, 2000; Gadamer, 2004). St Clair (2003, p. 72) claims that “critical reflection upon the worldview represented by Western science is one of the most fundamental and potentially insightful aspects of education for environmental literacy”. In addition to knowledge from the natural sciences, it seems prudent to include familiarity and capability with tools of sociological, critical and historical analysis in our
definition of environmental literacy; these will support the capacity to address the root causes of environmental degradation.

One way of engaging the whole person and increasing the likelihood of having a transformative effect is through active, experiential, learner centred, authentic pedagogies. This is a notion with a strong basis in EE/EfS literature, particularly that published since the Talloires Declaration was written (e.g. Davidson, 2010; Kevany, 2007; Henry, 1984; McNaughton, 2010; Thomas, 2009; Huckle, 1991). It was also a feature of declarations from EE/EfS conferences a number of years before the Talloires Declaration. For example, the 1975 Belgrade International Workshop on Environmental Education (UNESCO, 1977, p. 16) asserted a guiding principle of EE/EfS to be that “Environmental education should emphasize active participation in preventing and solving environmental problems.” Similarly, the declaration from the 1977 Tbilisi Conference (UNESCO 1978, p. 24) stated that EE/EfS “should involve the individual in an active problem-solving process within the context of specific realities, and it should encourage initiative, a sense of responsibility and commitment to build a better tomorrow”.

**Conclusion**

The Talloires Declaration was a groundbreaking agreement. It gave form to the recognition in many colleges and universities that sustainability is a responsibility of the tertiary sector. It highlighted many important areas of action to realize a commitment to sustainability. It did not, however, clearly show recognition of many social and cultural processes that are essential aspects of achieving change for the environment.

Clearly, we want to foster not only knowledge about environmental problems but also action to address environmental degradation (and its root causes in the patterns in our society). To do so, we need to recognize that we tend to develop a set of subjective dispositions that reflect the very production and consumption patterns that we identify in the Talloires Declaration as the cause of environmental problems.

This article highlights the largely tacit, intersubjectively formed (even embodied) nature of dispositions that underlie action or non-action for the environment. In order to get change on environmental issues, we need to foster transformation of our intersubjectively formed dispositions. Possibilities for achieving this include: opportunities for collaborative reflection and discussion on enculturated assumptions and on worthwhile futures; reflexivity; a critical consciousness that facilitates understanding of the root causes of environmental problems in terms of broader social,
political, and economic systems; authentic, experiential pedagogies; and resources from disciplines other than (or in addition to) the natural sciences, such as critical social theory.

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