



**ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION TARGETED AT SCHOOLCHILDREN  
AS PART OF *RADON'S* PUBLIC RELATIONS CAMPAIGN**

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In the former Soviet Union, environmental problems as well as other negative social and political phenomena were hushed up. Under environmental transparency, the public was shocked by the disclosed facts, and the reason for this was the wrong presentation of the information.

*Radon* (the company engaged in collection, transportation and disposal of Moscow and Moscow Region radwaste) was also severely criticized. The thing is that *Radon* has the word «radioactive» in its full name. That was enough for the prejudice to be formed. The public perceived *Radon* as the company polluting the environment instead of protecting it.

The transfer from full secrecy to public information proved to be a serious test for *Radon* specialists. A huge effort was needed. We started to organize shows and conferences, to write articles, to make radio- and TV programs and video films, though we were well aware how difficult it was to reverse the unfavorable public opinion.

That is why three years ago we decided to develop large-scale information campaign targeted at young people. Such work cannot bring positive results in the near future, it is a long-term effort. At first we held several meetings in Sergiev Posad schools (*Radon's* main branch, a repository and a radwaste treatment plant are located near this town). Children showed interest in classes attended by *Radon* lecturers, and we decided to join in the *Eco-Kray (Eco-Land)* Environmental Program coordinated by the Youth Creativity Center of Sergiev Posad. We believe it is extremely important that radioactive waste and safe use of atomic energy is on the general list of the problems relating to environmental protection. In our discussions with young people, we treat the problems of preservation of forests and rare animals and radwaste immobilization as the single one.

To implement the program, the first step should have been the teachers' training. It turned out that most of them had quite limited ideas about radiation, the use of nuclear power in Russia, and they had not heard about *Radon*. We organized teachers' training seminars and tours to the test ground. Our funds are scarce, as *Radon* still does not have a special budget for public information campaign. Despite this, we have managed to make teachers' tours quite comfortable having solved all problems relating to transportation, provision with meals, special-purpose clothes and dosimetric devices required for visits to radioactive waste zones.

Formats of work with young people depended on their age and preparation. The following formats were used: a lesson - lecture - conference - a practical assignment (work). On-site lectures and video film demonstrations proved to be the most efficient format. Quite often we did practical assignments: school children measured the radiation background in their class, or a hall (a chair), or a school yard. We also try to get the feed-back asking the students all kinds of general and specific questions relating to environmental protection, to see their level of understanding.

In the course of training, the following topics were touched upon:

1. What is radiation as physical phenomenon?
2. Natural character of radiation.
3. Scientific and technical progress and radwaste emergence.
4. Radwaste immobilization.
5. Radwaste storage.

Graphic materials were prepared to present the complicated technical issues in an easier, visual form.

It goes without saying that we try to make such lessons as less boring as possible, taking advantage of any opportunity to make a joke or to tell a funny story.

Schoolchildren like to play, and the play is the easiest way for them to assimilate the material. To raise their interest in environmental protection, we organized the brain-ring (a contest between school teams competing for better knowledge of environmental protection problems), and the competition of environmental drawings (the non-stereotyped way of thinking and the accuracy in the assessment of the environmental situation, and not the skills,

were the basic criteria of the evaluation). The winners were awarded with prizes and presents.

At the beginning, we lacked experience in conducting an information campaign targeted at the public in general and young people in particular, and we asked our West European colleagues to help us (for example, we approached Electricité de France specialists) and they gave us their valuable assistance.

We made up a questionnaire and conducted polls as a follow-up to our tours and lectures. The polls showed that the majority of the respondents had considerably improved their opinion with regards to *Radon* activity. They have started to treat the *Radon* location in their region with understanding and to positively assess the use of atomic energy in peaceful purposes.

There are several positive aspects in such environmental education effort targeted at schoolchildren.

**First**, soon schoolchildren will grow up and participate in the elections, and it is good that they have received accurate information with regards to radiation, nuclear power and *Radon* activity as early as being at school.

**Second**, not only schoolchildren, but also teachers receive the information from a reliable source, and the opinion of the latter is trusted and valued.

**Third**, adolescents are extremely sociable and inquisitive. They will share the new information with their brothers, sisters, friends, raising the number of environmentally-aware young people. Thus, we have a chance of influencing their parents in an indirect way, as children will tell them about their new knowledge. (Any of us is well aware that the information received from informal sources has a strong effect on us).

These three important aspects make us channel our efforts and funds to the education campaign targeted at schoolchildren.

We hope that in future we will not have to waste so much effort to overcome the mistrust of the local public. As a rule, it is not based on real facts: it is the result of poor access to information or even ignorance.