

2009

Enhancing Environmental Literacy and Global Learning among Honors Students

Liza Davis

Kennesaw State University, ldavis@kennesaw.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchchip>



Part of the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

Davis, Liza, "Enhancing Environmental Literacy and Global Learning among Honors Students" (2009). *Honors in Practice -- Online Archive*. 97.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchchip/97>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the National Collegiate Honors Council at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors in Practice -- Online Archive by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Enhancing Environmental Literacy and Global Learning among Honors Students

LIZA DAVIS

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY

In 2005, the National Environmental Education and Training Foundation (NEETF) released a summary of a decade's worth of research into environmental literacy among Americans, collected in collaboration with Roper Reports. The report included some disturbing statistics: 45 million Americans think the ocean is a fresh-water source, for example, and only 12% of those surveyed were able to pass a basic quiz on energy awareness. As the report's author laments, "Our years of data from Roper surveys show a persistent pattern of environmental ignorance even among the most educated and influential members of society" (Coyle v). Like most Americans, honors students are often only superficially aware of environmental concerns. Those who have developed some degree of environmental awareness may be praised or derided for "thinking outside the box," but as Amory Lovins, an energy analyst, argues, "There is no box" (qtd. in Brown xi). We are at a tipping point in our human interactions with nature, a crisis that demands we be more attentive than ever to interconnections and systems-thinking and move beyond the compartmentalization of knowledge that is characteristic of many university curricula.

For this reason, among others, our recent favorable accreditation review at Kennesaw State University was based in part on our success in promoting global learning and appreciation for diversity across campus. While the institution passed that review with no difficulty, the assessment of programs across campus continues to focus on whether global learning and diversity are being adequately addressed. As an honors director who is also co-directing the new Interdisciplinary Studies Program on our campus, chairing the university-wide Environmental Concerns Committee, and sitting on the President's Climate Commitment Board, I feel an especially urgent need to combine global learning with *environmental* learning, so two years ago I set out to design a course that would encourage honors students to analyze environmental issues more closely through the lens of world religions and cultures.

GOALS AND COURSE DEVELOPMENT

The challenge of developing a semester-length course on such a broad topic was intensified by the relative cultural homogeneity of KSU students. My

institution is located in the northwest quadrant of the metro Atlanta area, and its 21,000 students come primarily from northwest Georgia and southern Tennessee. Many also come from conservative religious backgrounds, and these students typically consider responding to environmental concerns less important than advancing their positions on specific social issues and maintaining a strong sense of exclusivity. Even those who brand themselves as more broad-minded nurse misconceptions about other religions.

As I considered all these factors, I decided to design a course curriculum that would meet our accreditation criteria and also raise the level of environmental literacy among our honors students. Fortunately, I received an internal grant to design the course and in the summer of 2007 spent six weeks in Oxford, England reading everything from scientific literature on global warming to books and articles on environmental philosophy. I emerged with a broader and more informed perspective on the complexities of ameliorating environmental ills. As scholars from Lester Brown, President of the Earth Institute, to the Dalai Lama have observed, aggressive advances in technology must also be accompanied by changes in cultural awareness and practical efforts to live more sustainably. These became the touchstones of my honors seminar, "Spirit and Nature: Religion and Environmental Values," taught as Honors 2290, a lower-level "special topics" course (a general designation for a wide variety of innovative courses offered in the program) for all levels of honors students, from those in our joint-enrollment honors program to college seniors. Of the thirteen students who enrolled, the oldest student in my class was forty-one, the youngest seventeen. Since as honors director I teach only one course a semester, I was able to concentrate on accommodating the curriculum to the students' various disciplinary and personal interests.

I found it fortunate that my students had declared a variety of majors, including English, biology, philosophy, and anthropology, and that among them were a practicing Daoist, a Zen Buddhist, a Jew, a Mormon, and several Protestants. Our exchanges were rich with different perspectives yet never rancorous or adversarial. In my thirty years of teaching college students, I have never seen a class make such sophisticated and wide-ranging connections, a process encouraged by the structure of the course and our choice of texts, but the result primarily of the opportunities the syllabus gave the students to facilitate their own learning.

COURSE TEXTS

The two texts I chose for the course played a major role in its success. In looking for an anthology of works examining religious attitudes toward environmental issues, I discovered *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, a collection of excerpts from sacred texts, contemporary critical commentary, and formal environmental declarations by figures such as Pope John Paul II and organizations such as the Evangelical Environmental Network. *This Sacred Earth* gave me inspiration for structuring my course, a

more-than-ample reading selection for my students, and abundant primary and secondary material that would provide fodder for student research and presentations. In fact, one of the anthology's most important selections, Lynn White's seminal essay "The Historical Roots of Our Environmental Crisis," became a reference point for many of our discussions. A medieval historian, White traces the deepening contemporary environmental crisis to the early spread of Christianity and its close association with capitalism in the early modern period. Given the dominance of Southern Baptist backgrounds among first-generation college students at KSU, many of whom come from middle-class families with modest incomes, White's essay struck a chord with my students and emerged again and again in our discussions.

Our second text, *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment is a Religious Issue*, was thinner and less formidable but in many ways even more valuable than the anthology. A compilation of speeches given at a 1990 symposium at Middlebury College, *Spirit and Nature* includes selections by major religious scholars from a wide spectrum of theological backgrounds. Among these are Audrey Shenandoah, an elder of the Onondaga Nation (part of the Iroquois confederacy); Ismar Schorsch, former Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and a professor of Jewish history; Tenzin Gyatso, His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, an Iranian professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University and renowned Muslim philosopher; and Sally McFague, a member of the United Methodist Church, Distinguished Theologian in Residence at Vancouver School of Theology, and former professor in divinity schools at Yale and Vanderbilt. Since the symposium had been designed for a broad academic audience, the readings made unfamiliar concepts accessible to my students just as they had eighteen years earlier for students at Middlebury.

Fortunately, Bill Moyers, journalist, author, and host of the PBS series *Now*, had taken a film crew to the conference, interviewed the speakers, and created a documentary of the experience, also titled "Spirit and Nature." Instead of airing the documentary in one sitting, I showed excerpts of Moyers' interview with one of the symposium speakers and snippets of his or her speech at the beginning of classes designated for discussion of a particular reading from the text; this proved to be a powerful strategy in triggering discussions about the readings.

COURSE STRUCTURE AND REQUIREMENTS

In the first week of the course we read selections from texts by Arne Naess and other proponents of "deep ecology" and its principle of biospheric egalitarianism, which asserts that all species have value independent of their presumed utility to human beings. Its corollary is that environmental ills can be amended only if we rediscover a spiritual connection with nature beyond that to which we have too often limited ourselves, a utilitarian one. I began with this concept for three reasons: its roots in secular humanism, which avoided any particular religious bias; its origins in twentieth-century ecology, which insured

its relevance; and, most important, its resonance within elements of every major religion we were to study. Then, for the remainder of the first half of the semester, we explored how Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and selected indigenous religions in North America, South America, and Africa define human interactions with nature. Finally, we looked at whether these traditions, or elements within them, have encouraged or discouraged environmental activism within the last fifty years. The course ended with an examination of movements such as Ecofeminism and Animal Rights/Animal Liberation, not based in any specific religious tradition but resonant with the values inherent in deep ecology, where we had begun.

Asking my students to present their research to the class proved to be the most effective teaching method I employed during the semester. Each of the twelve seminar participants chose a religious or secular movement and gave two presentations, the first accompanied by a literature review of the presentation's sources (handy preparation for the senior capstone thesis). The first presentation explored what carefully selected sacred texts or primary sources suggested about human interactions with nature. The student who selected Hinduism, for example, quoted and explained various passages from the *Vedas*; the student presenting on Daoism summarized parts of the *Daodejing*; and the student examining Islam's mandates regarding the treatment of animals and natural conservation analyzed portions of the *Qu'ran*. The students who chose indigenous spiritual traditions drew from transcripts of stories passed down through oral transmission.

The second assigned presentation addressed whether contemporary adherents to the religions we had discussed actually embraced environmental activism. Here, again, interdisciplinary connections abounded. For instance, in one presentation we learned about the Chipko Movement, in which Hindu women in rural India literally hugged trees in the forest adjoining their land to prevent deforestation by a mining operation. This topic sparked discussion on other expressions of ecofeminism, on the links between colonialism and the oppression of women, and on the power of micro-loans to revitalize cottage industries in India and other nations, even leading us to dissect the inflated rhetoric and faulty logic of a newspaper article written to entice travelers to a new, multi-million-dollar ski resort in the Himalayas—a classic example of “greenwashing,” using environmental rhetoric to seduce prospective buyers or customers into believing a product is environmentally friendly. Financed by the grandson of Henry Ford, this “ski village” was roundly opposed by environmentalists, who observed that it would affect 6,000 acres of land and 70 villages (Rao), displacing as many as 40,000 people and compromising the ecology of the Kullu Valley (O'Connor). But a “special report” on “adventure travel” in the July 20, 2008 *Sun Herald* of Sydney, Australia, praised the resort as “the next big North Indian thing,” an “eco-friendly” retreat where guests could learn “yogic breathing exercises” and experience “yak skiing”—being roped (improbably) to a yak and pulled uphill to a ski platform at the top of the slopes.

This and several other seminar sessions were really extended academic conversations, sometimes astonishing in their intensity. While we veered sometimes from the course's primary focus on spiritual belief systems, the interrelatedness of religious, cultural, economic, and political forces appealed to my students and accentuated the course's relevance to their experience.

As you might expect, designing a final exam for these students proved to be my greatest challenge. Since we had focused almost exclusively on a narrow range of religious attitudes toward nature in the first half of the course, I had been able to give my students a traditional midterm, with identifications and a choice of essay questions. But the dynamics of the course had changed by the end of the semester, mandating a take-home final that would test the students' creativity in drawing out the course's main themes and writing a coherent essay. After much thought, I came up with the following assignment:

Imagine you are the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The world's environmental crisis is deepening, and it is increasingly obvious that a wide array of strategies is needed to address it. The world's best scientists are working on technological solutions, while existing technology is gaining wide acceptance in the world's wealthiest nations. But this crisis demands rapid change on a cultural as well as technological front, so you decide to call an inter-faith summit of representatives from the world's major religions and secular movements such as ecofeminism and animal rights to participate.

As the summit opens, you challenge the participants to do three things:

1. Describe one *current* environmental issue they see as particularly important to the groups they represent, however narrow its focus.
2. Identify one *current or projected* initiative, even on a local (as opposed to regional or national) level, to address that issue.
3. Discuss one or more major tenets of their religion or cause that could radically change attitudes about human interactions with nature—across cultures.

Please write an essay in which you first identify THREE of the summit's participants and *explain why you chose each of them as representatives of a specific ideology*. Don't be afraid to be unconventional in your choices—or to resurrect the dead! Then explain how each participant would respond to the three tasks outlined above.

In almost every case, the students demonstrated an impressive depth of knowledge about specific traditions and texts and made unexpected connections with other branches of learning and current events. One member of the class wrote the final in narrative form, as Ban Ki-moon, introducing Chamundeyi, a Chipko protester; Lea Bill-Rippling Water, a member of the Northeastern American Cree tribe and environmental advocate; and Riane

Eisler, the renowned scholar and activist whose research examines the goddess archetype in various cultures. Another student focused exclusively on indigenous cultures threatened by deforestation, inviting as her guests Luther Standing Bear, a Lakota Indian who has decried the loss of forest in the Black Hills; Brian J. Gareau, who has researched the tensions between local indigenous peoples and forest-preservation groups in Honduras; and biologist and sustainability expert Bruce Byers, who has worked with indigenous populations in Zimbabwe. Even Lao Tzu appeared on the program, where he bantered with Pope John Paul II and Seyyed Nasr. Combinations I would never have imagined were presented coherently and persuasively, suggesting that our serendipitous, free-form class discussions had inspired good writing, not inhibited it.

CHANGE AND INTELLECTUAL TRANSFORMATIONS

Over the course of the term, my seminar students experienced some surprising changes in perspective, particularly in their assumptions about evangelical Christianity. As already noted, they embraced a variety of religious views, from Mormonism to Buddhism—none, in fact, described themselves as evangelicals—but they were all well acquainted with the conservative Christian tradition so deeply embedded in Southern culture. At the beginning of the semester, my youngest student, a joint-enrollment high-school senior attending a private evangelical Christian school, complained that her high-school teachers discouraged discussion of any kind and would have been profoundly suspicious of the idea that human beings should be stewards of nature rather than exercise “dominion” over it, as God demands in the King James version of Genesis. Her teachers were far more concerned, she explained, with gay marriage and abortion rights than with mountaintop removal or deforestation. Another of my seminar students, a non-traditional (older) student and mother of two, regularly shared anecdotes about her Southern Baptist neighbors, who refused to speak to neighbors who did not aggressively demonstrate their commitment to evangelical Christianity.

Most of my students believed, then, that evangelical Christians are uniformly anti-environmentalists, millenarians for whom the imminence of the Apocalypse eliminates any need to protect or conserve the physical world. However, after reading the “Evangelical Declaration on the Environment” created by the Evangelical Environmental Network and signed by Evangelical Christian ministers, organizational leaders, theologians, and lay members, they learned that a growing number of evangelicals are working to get beyond traditional attitudes and advance ecological solutions to environmental degradation. This revelation was the first of many, and as we moved through the semester, we all abandoned preconceptions about various religious and cultural traditions. We also grappled with the difficulty of disentangling the religious aspects of Southern culture from dominant social values—from resistance to gun control laws to contempt for governmental regulation—and came away with a much greater awareness of religious complexity.

The seminar participants also became more critical readers—more sensitive to the nuances of language and expression—and connected what they were reading with larger social and political patterns in Western society. In discussing Audrey Shenandoah's essay "A Tradition of Thanksgiving" (from *Spirit and Nature*), for example, we found ourselves questioning naïve cultural stereotypes of Native Americans as closer to nature than other ethnicities and examining how such simplistic thinking could obscure the complex issues facing this group in contemporary American society. In assessing Seyyed Nasr's condemnation of western colonialism as the ultimate cause of environmental deterioration in Islamic countries, we began to look more critically at the environmental impacts of the war on Iraq. Yet we also pondered the centuries-old progress of desertification in the Middle East, a process enhanced by Western-style development but in force for generations. Sensing my students' ambivalence about what they perceived as a false dichotomy in Nasr's argument that "The modern Westerner . . . owes nothing to anyone or anything. . . . [whereas] the traditional Muslim or *homo islamicus* has always lived in an awareness of the rights of God and of others" (95), I had them read an essay from *This Sacred Earth* by Islamic scholar Nawal H. Ammar, noted for her work on women in Islamic cultures. In "An Islamic Response to the Manifest Ecological Crisis: Issues of Justice," Ammar argues that the "dignified reserve" implied in the Arabic term *hay'a* is central to the principle of a just transaction at the heart the Islamic economic system yet is often belied by the dehumanization of women in Islamic society. Reducing women to "reproductive apparatuses," she suggests, has caused overpopulation and led to "environmental depletion in the forms of pollution, disease, infant mortality, and crime" (287–288). My students liked Ammar's balanced approach to framing environmental issues in Islamic society. In fact, they became so absorbed in comparing her and Nasr's main points that they continued their discussion for fifteen minutes beyond our allotted class time—a rare phenomenon even for honors students.

Finally, several of the students expressed their desire to act on what they had learned by better educating their peers in both environmental awareness and what Kevin Coyle calls "personal conduct knowledge," or the marriage of awareness and action that contributes to environmental improvements in one's immediate context (15). We discussed ways of providing incentives for KSU students to use the recycling bins on each floor of every campus building, and several students expressed interest in joining the student-run "Environmental Alliance" on campus. One joined our honors student advisory board to plan and implement hands-on environmental projects for honors students, from planning an organic garden to working with the Office of Residence Life to encourage recycling competitions in on-campus residence halls.

FINAL THOUGHTS

As with every course I have taught for the first time, I would do a few things differently with the benefit of hindsight. I would narrow the range of topics we

discussed, giving more time to each. In my first effort, I discovered, for example, that the principle of *wuwei*, or “non-action,” central to Daoism provided ample material for a presentation on the religion’s basic tenets regarding human interactions with nature, but it stymied any attempt to find evidence of environmental activism among its adherents. Yet we devoted two full weeks to Daoism and as a result were forced to limit our discussion of Ecofeminism and the Animal Rights movement to one week. I would also put more works on electronic reserve and mandate more supplemental reading. And I would bring in guest speakers from among our international faculty to provide a wider context for our discussions.

Since KSU’s Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning invites faculty to apply for course development grants every year, I will again pursue summer funding, with the aim of incorporating these changes into the course as well as adding an applied component (hands-on student projects in the local community). Whatever the outcome of my grant application, I will be co-teaching another, very similar honors seminar in the fall of 2009 with a colleague who specializes in environmental philosophy. This time, however, the course will be offered as an upper-level honors elective, Honors 4490, and if it succeeds, we will formalize it, making it a permanent offering within the honors curriculum. However we redesign the syllabus, I hope it will be just as provocative as its predecessor in raising environmental awareness and highlighting the complexity of global learning in the twenty-first century. The need for environmental education is urgent: as Lester Brown, the founder of the Earth Policy Institute, says, “Saving our civilization is not a spectator sport” (286). It demands that as educators we cultivate well informed and politically active citizens for whom environmental action has both spiritual and material rewards.

ENDNOTES

1. To supplement the “Evangelical Declaration on the Environment,” we viewed Bill Moyers’ documentary “Is God Green?” Moyers interviews environmentally conscious evangelical ministers and parishioners in rural Idaho and West Virginia as well as a conservative evangelical theologian who argues that any suffering caused by human activities such as mountain-top removal (graphically displayed in the video) can be explained by divine will.
2. Most of my students also read books I had placed on reserve, including *Plan B 3.0: Mobilizing To Save Civilization*, an examination of the causes and effects of global warming and new options for addressing it; *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy*, an encyclopedia of sorts with topics in environmental consciousness arranged chronologically; and *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, an anthology edited (as was *This Sacred Earth*) by Roger Gottlieb but focused exclusively on recent essays by an array of international scholars such as O.P. Dwivedi, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Jacob Olupona.

REFERENCES

- Ammar, Nawal H. "An Islamic Response to the Manifest Ecological Crisis: Issues Of Justice." Gottlieb, *This Sacred Earth*, 285–299.
- Brown, Lester R. *Plan B 3.0: Mobilizing to Save Civilization*. New York: Norton, 2008.
- Coyle, Kevin. "Environmental Literacy in America: What Ten Years of NEETF/Roper Research and Related Studies Say About Environmental Literacy in the U.S." *National Environmental Education Foundation*. Sept. 2005. 17 Oct. 2008. <<http://www.neefusa.org/pdf/ELR2005.pdf>>.
- Gottlieb, Roger, ed. *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- . *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. "Islam and the Environmental Crisis." Rockefeller 86–108.
- O'Connor, Ashling. "Ford's Resort Aims to Bring Luxury Skiing to the Roof of The World." *The Times* (London) 1 September 2007. LexisNexis *Academic* 11 Nov. 2008. Keyword: Himalayan Ski Village.
- Rao, Vepa. "Ski Project Runs Into Rough Weather." *The Statesman* 15 June 2007. LexisNexis *Academic* 11 Nov. 2008. Keyword: Himalayan Ski Village.
- Rockefeller, Stephen C., and John C. Elder. *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment Is a Religious Issue*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.
- Southerden, Louise. "Surf, Ski, Walk the Wild Side: Adventure Travel—Special Report." *The Sun Herald* (Sydney, Australia) 20 July 2008. LexisNexis *Academic* 11 Nov. 2008. Keyword: Himalayan Ski Village.

The author may be contacted at

ldavis@kennesaw.edu.

