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Lewis & Clark

The Chronicle Magazine **Portland, Oregon Spring 2008**

The New Environmentalism

Lewis & Clark explores a 21st-century vision of environmental studies

Lewis & Clark embraces a 21st-century vision of environmental studies that is holistic, interdisciplinary, and firmly rooted in a sense of place.

The New Environmentalism

By Tom Krattenmaker

Photography by Robert Reynolds

On an early summer day, a dozen Lewis & Clark faculty members stand on a levy at the Columbia Slough, quizzing a flood-control engineer about the maze of equipment and channels laid out before them. The slough, a lazy backwater that runs parallel to the Columbia River in north Portland, is a complex 18-mile-long system of less-than-pristine wetlands and drainage ditches. It is definitely not a scenic gem. But according to Jim Proctor, director of environmental studies, this "industrial sanctuary" is precisely the kind of place from which to glimpse the future of environmentalism.

Nearly a dozen academic departments are represented in this group of denim-clad undergraduate faculty who are participating in Proctor's environmental studies workshop. Their purpose is to learn how to infuse the concepts of the emerging new environmentalism into their teaching and research.

They come from the predictable academic areas—biology, geology, environmental studies—but also from some unexpected departments and offices: mathematics, computer science, history, sociology, philosophy, athletics, and the college chapel. Among them is Andrew Bernstein, associate professor of history, who is about to embark on a trip to Japan to research a book on the role of Mount Fuji in Japanese culture. He's here, he says, because "I want to be able to look at Fuji in a holistic way."

"Holistic" is precisely the aspiration Proctor is promoting at the workshop. Because, as with any ecological hot spot, sizing up the slough in an all-encompassing way gives you the bigger story—in this case, the story of how Portland's development has affected the natural environment. Proctor believes that only by

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understanding "the environment" as a product of nature *and* myriad human endeavors, from industry to recreation to religion, can today's coming-of-age generation hope to be effective in addressing the ecological challenges awaiting it.

The point of traveling to the slough, Proctor explains later, is to toss professors into the same intellectual swimming pool as new environmental studies students. The first step is to complicate everything, to become immersed in the reality that saving the planet goes well beyond 20th-century approaches like stanching the flow of pollutants from the end of a pipe. As Lewis & Clark's environmental studies program asks, what deeper human processes created that pipe and the factory of which it is a part?

"The Columbia Slough isn't really 'natural,'" Proctor reflects, "but it's not entirely human-made, either. When you experience it firsthand, you find it's a hybrid entity with interesting contradictions and complexities. We're hoping that these professors, just like our students, build an appreciation of the non-black-and-white nature of environmental issues."

Overleaf and above: Undergraduate faculty take to canoes to explore the Columbia Slough, an "industrial sanctuary" in north Portland.

Lewis & Clark, a committed environmental leader, factors sustainability into its decisions about the design and construction of buildings; the food served in campus dining facilities; the energy used to heat and light classrooms, residence halls, and offices; and the way students, staff, and faculty commute to campus. President Tom Hochstettler has made Lewis & Clark part of the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment, dedicated to achieving "carbon neutrality." In addition, Lewis & Clark is home to Focus the Nation, a national initiative led by economics professor Eban Goodstein that links students and citizens directly with political leaders to discuss solutions to global warming.

Environmental concerns permeate Lewis & Clark Law School as well, from its nationally acclaimed environmental law program to the legal work of the Pacific Environmental Advocacy Center and the International Environmental Law Project. And students at Lewis & Clark's Graduate School of Education and Counseling study with leaders in the emerging field of eco-psychology.

But perhaps the study of the environment occurs in its broadest sense in the undergraduate college—specifically, in the environmental studies program.

Established a decade ago by the late Evan Williams, professor of chemistry, the environmental studies program now graduates 18 students a year on average, equaling many longer-established departments. Students majoring in environmental studies take advanced math; a rigorous set of courses in the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities; and five core courses in "E-N-V-S," as the program is popularly known.

Some students enter the program as budding activists, some as aspiring scientists. They are quickly confronted with ideas that challenge their assumptions and force them to think about the environment in far more expansive ways, says Liz Safran, associate professor of geological science and a member of the Environmental Studies Steering Committee.

Despite all the popular rhetoric today about carbon dioxide, carbon footprints, carbon credits, and carbon cycles, it's not just about the carbon, according to Safran. "The conversation could and should be much broader than it has been. So we're trying to expand our thinking to consider what's driving the carbon.

Students in the environmental studies program blanketed all three floors of John R. Howard Hall in research-specific posters and other media during an end-of-semester celebration in December 2007.

Ultimately, it goes all the way to our narratives about what constitutes the good life."

In other words, what about our societal organization leads us to continued dependence on fossil fuels despite mounting worry that we are contributing to irreparable climate damage? How does that relate to our conception of the pursuit of happiness enshrined in the nation's founding documents? How are the natural growth aspirations of the developing world respected when their economic engines create more pollution? What role do business-related pursuits like product development and marketing play in addressing climate change?

"I remember coming out of my first course in the program with changed perception of what 'environmentalism' means," says Amber Shasky, a senior from Hansville, Washington, who arrived at Lewis & Clark expecting to major in art before environmental studies captured her imagination. "I once viewed environmentalism to be limited to 'green' activities and campaigns, such as recycling or saving polar bears. I now see many more layers of complexity and interrelationships."

Kelly Rogala, a senior from San Francisco and an aspiring teacher, has also embraced the program's philosophy. "Now," he says, "whenever I get into conversations with people about anything related to environmental studies, I generally ask more questions than I answer. I think that this may be frustrating to a lot of people who expect specifics. Overall, though, I think this is healthy and a good way to continually try to better myself as a student and as an educator."

"Complicate everything" can be a course to paralysis by analysis if mentors and students aren't careful to remain grounded in reality. That's why the program makes certain that the student's journey to complexity always loops back to something concrete, as

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in specific locales, problems, and projects. The nature and direction of those return voyages are demonstrated by student research projects, poster-size descriptions of which line the walls of John R. Howard Hall, where the program is housed.

Among these projects: exploring water scarcity and economic growth in Xinjian, China; examining hydrologic processes in Tryon Creek State Park; critiquing the relationship between environmental education and consumerism; studying landslide and lava dome dynamics on the Owyhee River in southeastern Oregon; and using Geographic Information System data and satellite-based weather data for avalanche forecasting on Mount Hood.

"With environmental studies—and with every other part of our curriculum—we strive to create civic leaders," says Julio de Paula, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and coauthor of a leading textbook on physical chemistry. "That is, we tailor environmental studies to produce graduates who are well-informed and who see any issue from a variety of perspectives—thinking simultaneously, for example, as a sociologist, biologist, and entrepreneur."

Last fall, students explored environmental issues from the perspective of two rebels: Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, coauthors of a widely circulated essay with the seemingly heretical title "The Death of Environmentalism." These "bad boys" of environmentalism were the keynote speakers at Lewis & Clark's annual Environmental Affairs Symposium.

No, Shellenberger and Nordhaus do not suggest that everyone stop worrying about the environment. Rather, they are heralding the end of a conventional environmentalism that they believe has outlived much of its usefulness and calling for a new model for confronting the planet's daunting environmental challenges.

As the pair have gone on to elaborate in their subsequent book, *Break Through*, capitalism has a big role to play in solving environmental problems. In fact, finding these solutions may help bridge the historical divide between the business and environmentalist communities. The "death of environmentalism" pair argue, and recent articles in the mainstream business press support, that there are profits to be earned by those who can discover, develop, and market crucially needed clean-energy technologies—profits that will also lead to a healthier planet.

That the student organizers of Lewis & Clark's environmental symposium invited Shellenberger and Nordhaus speaks forcefully about the direction of the program, Proctor notes.

"The subtitle of their symposium talk was 'Debating New Ideas and Strategies,' which really explains why we brought them in," Proctor says. "That's what we're trying to do here in environmental studies—prepare the new environmental leaders, the movers and shakers of tomorrow."

At the national level, environmental studies is a field still in its infancy. Although an estimated 600 of the nation's thousands of colleges and universities have environmental studies programs, Proctor says, few have achieved academic legitimacy or the necessary steeping in interdisciplinary rigor. Lewis & Clark's commitment to spanning disciplines is reflected in the diverse academic fields of the faculty on the environmental studies roster, including biology, philosophy, economics, geology, international affairs, sociology, and others.

The program's interdisciplinary approach, combined with an academically rigorous foundation and an emphasis on "situated research," helps define the distinctive personality of environmental studies at Lewis & Clark.

The term "situated research," coined by Proctor and his colleagues, involves embracing the inevitable complexity and breadth of any environmental issue, but then studying its specifics by homing in not just on a particular problem, but a particular place.

Situated research was the theme of the program's annual symposium earlier this year ("Situating Environmental Crises"), and it is the crux of a multifaceted project being undertaken with the support of the prestigious Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Lewis & Clark's approach to environmental studies received Mellon's endorsement last year in the form of a three-year, $300,000 grant to further develop opportunities for students to pursue interdisciplinary research. The Mellon-funded program has both international and national dimensions.

Internationally, the grant will fund situated research opportunities that dovetail with Lewis & Clark's overseas study program. For example, environmental studies majors studying in Australia, East Africa, Ecuador, Hong Kong, India, and Scotland will work with faculty mentors to conduct individual research during their time abroad.

At Lewis & Clark, environmental studies encompasses several academic disciplines. Here Alyssa King, intern in campus planning, Andrew Bernstein, associate professor of history, and Jim Proctor, director of environmental studies, exchange ideas with Liz Safran, associate professor of geological science.

Nationally, the grant will support two dozen students—from Lewis & Clark and other colleges and universities—to undertake collaborative research projects. The venture will begin with a workshop on Palatine Hill this spring and will culminate with a conference in 2010.

A sense of pending apocalypse imbues environmentalism with a crisis mentality. Students worry about grim possibilities in their future: rising temperatures, catastrophic melting of polar ice sheets, rising seas flooding heavily populated coastal areas. That's just one piece of it. Add in looming biodiversity loss, toxins in the water and air, population centers running out of water. Having so much to worry about can produce the decision not to worry about any of it, leading to apathy.

Situated research, on the other hand, can make the seemingly unmanageable a little more manageable. It all comes back to place.

That place, on this June day in Portland, is the Columbia Slough, where Proctor and his colleagues are making the rounds and pondering the larger story told by this hybrid locale.

The slough is full of odd combinations: a woodpecker alighting from a tree in the middle of a meadow against a backdrop of bulldozers; a waterway teeming with beavers, muskrats, and other river-dwelling creatures just blocks from Portland's New Columbia neighborhood, the site of 21st-century urban renewal in what used to be one of the city's most blighted areas.

Fish snagged in the slough are still eaten at one's peril, but the waterways are far more appealing than they once were. They used to run red—from blood—back when slaughterhouses lined the banks.

Humans have lived and worked here in patterns that have changed dramatically over the past two centuries. Long before Columbus, Native Americans hunted and fished along its banks; in the 19th century, immigrants raced to establish land claims on its verdant meadows; and during World War II, African American shipyard workers made their homes in nearby Vanport, before the flood of 1948 destroyed their community. It should come as no surprise, then, that the site visited by the college contingent is rich in topics for discussions about social and environmental justice.

"What we're experimenting with," Safran says, "are ways we can situate environmental issues by focusing on a particular place and thinking about the intersections of all the processes that have shaped its evolution. Going to the Columbia Slough is our effort to throw ourselves into these issues and begin to uncover what's at work at this particular location."

As the professors climb into college vans to head back to campus, Proctor takes a moment to reflect on the larger point of their field trip. Is the slough an industrial wasteland? A wildlife sanctuary? Both? Perhaps the only thing more complex than the water dynamics—the channels and tides and gargantuan mechanical pumping efforts—is the tangle of intellectual, economic, political, and moral issues that make the slough such a rich place for the pursuit of 21st-century environmentalism.

"A visit to this place makes things interesting, complicated," Proctor says with a widening smile. "And that's the point. I think what we're really saying is that the better you understand a problem, the more likely you are to solve it." ■

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