

Environmental Studies from the Early Years: Impressionistic Reflections

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Introduction, Distinctions and Caveats

These are personal reflections on the origins of the Environmental Studies Program at the University of Victoria (UVic). To explain why we started this program, and how it developed, I recount the personal and cultural background of the grass roots environmental movement in the early 70s. In the 60s we hardly used the words “environmental movement.” This came to refer to efforts in our society to curb widespread damages to farm land, urban environments and the natural world. As environmental concern grew, we distinguished between the environmental movement, environmental studies, environmental education and applying ecological principles to different disciplines (such as ecopsychology). The science of ecology was identified mainly with biology. An early application of ecological analysis outside biology was in Sociology in the 1950s to “urban ecology.” We distinguished between educational programs and original research aiming to further knowledge.

In the 1960s several scientific studies showed that human made chemicals are more persistent than we thought, and they can spread through a whole ecosystem. Agricultural chemicals, for example, were found far from their source of application on fields and orchards. In the 60s the effects of some of these chemicals were implicated in declining reproduction rates of bird species such as bald eagles and brown pelicans. There were well known problems of urban air pollution affecting distant hills, as in the Los Angeles basin. Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring* provided an overview of scientific environmental research. We already knew of human damage to the natural world from bad forestry and farming. We were trying to reclaim damaged land and preserve wilderness areas we considered important for the common good. We knew that the 1930s dust bowl years in the Prairies were a result of drought combined with bad agricultural practices.

Public concerns about environmental problems began to grow in the mid 60s. This led to the first Earth Day in 1970 as people all over the world were eager to support corrective actions. There were deep appraisals of the industrial approach to primary production and energy use. In North America the focused public concern gave rise to the grass roots environmental movement. This was helped by the civil rights and peace movements. By the end of the 60s grass roots efforts focused on reforming our practices related to war, peace, social justice and ecological responsibility. There was a proliferation of NGOs. During this time, the academic, scientific and intellectual communities engaged in sustained environmental research, teaching and publication. We distinguished between social-political movements such as environmentalism, and programs teaching about relations with nature and environmental responsibility, which we called “environmental education.” “Environmental Studies” (ES) referred to programs of interdisciplinary research and education at the post secondary level and including graduate studies. Such programs sought to extend our knowledge beyond narrow specialized foci. We aimed to provide depth *and* comprehensiveness, and to see our society’s activities in historical and global contexts.

I will contextualize this social process explaining why we supported educational reforms with new programs of research to study our relations with the natural world. We were changed in ways that enriched our lives and relationships by being professionally and personally engaged in this undertaking. This account is sparse as I only mention some of the many people who were involved in ES on our campus and beyond.

Background and Dawning of Environmental Awareness

The grass roots environmental movement began in North America in the mid 1960s. At the time, there were already conservation-preservation organizations with some national and regional government support for their aims. Many of us grew up aware of the bad effects of poor farming and destructive forestry. We knew treasured places that we wanted to preserve as parks and wilderness areas. Conservation efforts reflected a variety of personal experiences. Some efforts were focused on wildlife species and habitats, others on soils and forests. Commitments were based on what we had learned to value in school, and from adults and our own experiences in nature. We were aware of the history of the conservation-preservation movement in North America. We knew that our aims were part of this larger movement. Our care for the natural world had many historical precedents. We learned from history that such concerns were expressed even in ancient times, for example BCE in Greece and China.

My background is typical of many in this respect. My family lived through the dust bowl years in the prairies. We call these years the “Dirty Thirties”. Dad was born on a pioneer homestead. His people were from rural farms in Norway. They knew how to farm carefully to look after the land and its inhabitants. We were taught early to appreciate the natural world *and* good farming. In the Dirty Thirties, major efforts were launched by national and local governments to reclaim damaged land and replant destroyed forests. In school we learned about soil conservation, and how to wisely manage water, soil and other resources. Our appreciation for the natural world was not limited to cultivated land. It included the wild lands beyond the farms and also the uncultivated stream bottoms. We played on the prairie, in the lakes, rivers and in the wooded groves along the rivers. These were some of our early experiences of human-nature relations, and then the Second World War broke out.

Like many others, our family left the plains around 1941 and went to the West Coast because of the Second World War. As we traveled west on the train, we were awed by the foothills, rivers, forests and mountains of the Rockies and other ranges. On the coast, we were impressed by the beauty of the water, forests and mountains. In school we met youngsters whose parents took us hiking in the forests and mountains of our area. When we grew older we started climbing and hiking in the wild forests and mountains on our own. For some of us this became a passionate avocation. We loved wild mountain places and considered them sacred. Engaged in these activities as young adults, we met others who shared our love for wild places. We realized that the cities and towns were slowly encroaching on these “sacred” areas. The forests were being clear-cut and replaced by tree plantations. From mountain summits, we could see the spreading loss of wild lands and forests. We saw the air quality deteriorate as the distant mountains became less clear. With this background and experience many of us were drawn to organizations whose aim was caring for nature and preserving wild lands.

By the 1960s we felt an urgent need to preserve unprotected wild areas that we knew and treasured. We focused on what we knew and loved. We did not always connect our concern for these special areas with a more general approach to caring for nature. Our efforts tended to be piecemeal, focusing on conservation of forest land and preservation of *unique wild areas*. We were also concerned about water and air pollution and toxic chemicals in our food. There were differences between those who followed John Muir and the preservation movement, and those who supported conservation for wise resource use. Muir expressed a love for the inherent value of wild beings and places, whereas Gifford Pinchot and others emphasized stewardship and wise resource use as necessary for human well being. We did not originally see how all of these concerns could be served by means of a *wider unified environmental movement*.

Many of us were politically active in conservation organizations which worked for more parks and wilderness areas and to encourage wise resource use and conservation. By the end of the 60s we realized that our efforts could fail if focused only on special areas. Preserved lands, we saw, are affected by their larger regions; the problems, we realized, are often international in scope. We sought a more unified approach that brought all our concerns together. We shifted our perspectives in fundamental ways. We were inspired by Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* (1962), which ushered in a major change in our understanding of environmental issues. We began to see *how* they are interrelated. She helped us to see how our separate activities and their impacts are *interconnected in the natural world*. She helped us to see the natural world from the perspective of a *field ecologist*. She helped us to realize that the problems are often not just local, but can be systemic and even global. They are interconnected with our cultural values and technology practices. We better understood the interrelated nature of food web processes in the natural world, and how human systems interact with these ecosystems. During the 60s global systems studies also underscored basic messages in Carson's book.

Carson helped us to realize something we tacitly knew from our own observations. When we view a whole watershed in a natural park, we know that the movement of water is an interrelated and interconnected process. From the ridge tops and high snow fields, to rivulets, streams, and rivers in valleys, to the distant marine estuaries, is an interconnected process. What we put into the watershed, from the summit to the valley below, is part of the whole system. The rain that falls on the mountain tops ends up in the sea. The atmosphere, too, is a dynamic interrelated process connecting the landscapes and seas, as it brings the rain storms in from the ocean. Carson describes the natural world as an interrelated process of living beings and energy flows forming complex and complementary relationships; the local niches and communities are all within larger ecosystem wholes. We are part of these processes within these ecosystem fields and energy flows. We participate in these systems. We decide how we will act in these relationships. We cannot choose to live outside of them. We affect them and they affect us. We became aware of our ecological effects *and* responsibilities.

During the 1960s the grass roots movements for social justice and peace helped to spur the movement for responsible treatment of the natural world. The dawning awareness that we are damaging ecosystems and habitats led to the national and international environmental movement. By the early 1970s people active in environmental research and policy studies realized that we need a comprehensive and global approach to these problems. We need actions at the local, regional and international levels. A series of publications outlined the effects of human industrial activity on the natural environment. One influential series of studies was sponsored by the Club of Rome. Their first book in 1972 by D. H. and D. L. Meadows was entitled "*The Limits to Growth*." Despite shortcomings, these studies underscored the *systemic and interrelated nature of the problems*, and how human activities impact the built and natural world. These studies united ecology with systems research. Systems studies had already made major contributions to research and development in industry. They enabled us to get a view of how whole systems work down to local details. The development of the *air transport system*, for example, would not have been possible without these whole systems, *interdisciplinary approaches*. Teams of researchers included such disciplines as literature, anthropology, physics and engineering. Two recent systems studies in the tradition of *Limits to Growth* are the *Ecological Footprint* (1992) by Bill Rees and Mathias Wackernagel, and *The Chaos Point: The World at the Crossroads* (2006) by Ervin Laszlo.

In the universities and colleges we studied environmental problems to learn how education and research can improve our relations with the natural world. We realized that our specialized approaches to knowledge were too limited. We needed to see the *natural world as a whole with*

us in it. Our discussions were difficult at times because of the specialized languages of our different subjects and fields. The world, we realized, is not divided into subjects and disciplines. Specialized experts can miss the larger implications of what our technologies are doing. Academic disciplines are cultural creations that have advantages for detailed specialized knowledge with short term purposes. The interconnected processes of the natural world have much longer time spans and larger interconnected areas. The challenge is to effectively address environmental problems and issues in *comprehensive and deep ways*.

Public concern grew more widespread as the seriousness of environmental problems became generally recognized. Governments created environmental protection agencies, laws, and policies that required mitigating actions. Colleges and universities created programs in environmental education and research. We debated whether to have awareness raising programs, or more comprehensive approaches to redesign our economic and technology systems. The first Earth Day, started by U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson, was held on April 22, 1970. In 1971 Earth Day was officially endorsed by U Thant and the UN. Celebrations were held around the world and on campuses all over North America. A host of new institutes, schools, programs, departments, and committees were created. There were new journals, other publications, areas of research and learning programs. Some of these efforts were experimental as we sought to learn *how to create effective cross cultural, interdisciplinary environmental research and education*.

ES at the University of Victoria (UVic)

At UVic Marc Bell, Derrick Sewell and other faculty members brought forth proposals to address Environmental issues on our campus. They recommended an approach to Environmental Studies (ES) that could be implemented with low cost in a short time. A comprehensive proposal surfaced in 1972 which was circulated to the Arts and Sciences faculty for comment. In 1974 Arts and Sciences Dean Jean-Paul Vinay established a committee to implement key elements in the proposal. This was the beginning of the University wide experimental program in Environmental Studies. This program was approved by the Faculty of Arts and Sciences with the condition that it be reviewed in 4 years. In 1978 the program had an extensive review. The steering committee submitted their report with a number of recommendations. The main proposal was that ES be made a regular interdisciplinary program with its own director and steering committee. These recommendations were approved by the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, the University Senate, and the Board of Governors. Thus in 1979 ES became a regular campus program that evolved into the School of Environmental Studies by 1999. Many students and faculty were involved in the early phases of ES development on our campus. After 36 years most of the aims of the program pioneers have been realized.

In the early years we had many discussions about how best to develop an ES program to address the issues raised by serious environmental problems. The most comprehensive proposal was for a broadly based interdisciplinary institute devoted to research and education in environmental problems and issues. Such an undertaking requires substantial resources in funds, personnel and space. Some universities undertook such ambitious programs, but at UVic we started in a gradual way. As an experimental program with almost no budget, we borrowed our personnel, courses, space and resources from existing departments. The first committee to oversee the program had 7-8 members who were from the Humanities, Social Sciences and the Life and Physical Sciences. Members of the original committee were Peter Murphy (from Geography, the first Chair), George Beer, Martin Hocking, Marc Bell, Alan Drengrson and Rennie Warburton. Also on the committee in the early years were Herb Smith, Steve Webb, Gerald Walters, and Alan Austin.

During the early years some thought that environmental problems could be solved mostly by technical means through science and technology. We can modify our systems, but not change our basic values and attitudes toward the Earth. Others, in the Social Sciences, for example in Economics and Political Science, thought that economic and policy matters should be the main focus. Some in the Humanities thought these problems involve our ultimate values and personal philosophies in conflict with the values of the ecosphere. Clearly, all aspects of the problems needed to be addressed. It was difficult then to say which should have priority. Since our program used existing resources, it had a number of different focuses and themes, depending on the interests and fields of study of those involved including students. We went through the University Calendar with colleagues from various disciplines to identify relevant courses. We encouraged creating new courses to address issues in specific fields. Over time new courses were introduced such as environmental psychology by Robert Gibson, environmental economics by Leonard Ladidao, environmental philosophy by Alan Drengson, a natural resource course by Bill Ross, and an ecology course tailored to the Environmental Studies program.

We learned with experience what worked, and also what could be removed from program descriptions. The first Environmental Studies course, ES 300, was added in 1975. This interdisciplinary course was designed to bring ES students and faculty together for discussions and shared projects. Marc Bell led this course in its early years. It was problem oriented, emphasized group process, and provided off campus and interdisciplinary experience. ES 300 had many memorable events such as design-ins with Stan King and weekends at Yellow Point Lodge near Ladysmith. This was the first of many ES courses. There also were double listed ES Courses mentioned above such as ES 314 also was listed as Philosophy 333.

The chair of the ES steering committee was rotated between the members from different departments and faculties. The ES Program was eventually under the Dean of Social Sciences when the Arts and Sciences Faculty split into three divisions. During the review in 1978 the chair of the committee, Alan Drengson, taught one course less than normal load in order to conduct the review and administer the program. He served a number of terms on the Steering Committee. From 1979 on there was continuing development of courses and research into expanding areas of interest such as environmental law and politics. Today in the university community, and on other campuses, are publications on environmental literature, ecoliterature, ecocriticism, environmental history, and so on. There are courses to train teachers in environmental education within the Education Faculty. There is work relevant to Environmental Studies in art, music and history of art. A major area added to the UVic ES Program is Ecological Restoration first headed by Don Eastman in 1999. Don developed a number of courses in restoration and students also did studies on restoration efforts in various places off campus.

Since its inception the ES Program at UVic has provided a lot of synergy within the University and with the larger community. Looking back, many of our advanced research programs reflect the *methods and purposes we used to integrate our separate disciplines* to meet the challenges of the environmental crisis. We learned how to communicate complexity in more open and simple ways. We learned to communicate across disciplines and how to cooperate and pool our resources for effective action and learning. There was a tremendous growth in library and other media resources. By 1989 the ES Program had become a Department with Full Time Equivalents (FTEs), tenured professors and a regular budget within the Faculty of Social Sciences. Duncan Taylor was the first FTE and was appointed in 1986 as a Sessional and then in 1989 as an Assistant Professor. He introduced a number of ES Courses, such as ES300A/B Environmental Perspectives and Environmental Issues, which was completely redesigned from the 300 version Marc Bell had taught. Over the years, Taylor also introduced ES 414 Introduction to Natural and

Social Systems, ES 400A/B Advanced Systems Theory, ES 404 Discourses of Environmentalism, ES 412 Canada in Transition, and ES 380 Introduction to Integral Systems Theory and Practice.

During the next phase of development we created the first joint Chair of Environmental Studies with the Faculty of Law, currently held by Michael M’Gonigle who came in 1995. We had a full term Director, Paul West, secretarial and marking assistants, and students on every level, including grad studies. Students can do a double major in ES and another discipline. They can also do a minor in ES. They can do Special Arrangement Graduate Degrees which are chaired by interdisciplinary committees. In 2000 the program had 15 graduate students. Paul West served one of the longest terms as Director from 1987 to 2001, and he also received an environmental research grant in Chemistry. Under Paul’s direction the program developed in several dimensions and eventually became a School. He also introduced the ES Course in Environmental Protection (originally ES 432).

Some of the other faculty, who served as Chair before ES became a School in 1999 were Bill Ross, Marc Bell, and Gerry Walter. Some of the committee members during the next phase were Eric Roth, Rob Walker, Bill Carroll, Steve Lonegran, Phil Dearden, Geraldine Allen, Michele Pujol, Malcolm Rutherford, Mike Edgell, Gloria Snively, Chris Tollefson, Rod Dobell, Richard Ring, and Victoria Wyatt. Sharon Nicolson was the longtime administrative assistant to the program and her contribution to its operation was invaluable. There were also many Sessional Instructors invaluable to the program such as Angus Taylor, Thomas Heyd, Sarah Hutchinson, Doug Patterson, Bob Hay, Paul Senez, Jamie Allan, Susan Abs, and Fiona Chambers. There were also other faculty members Wendy Wickwire who came in 1995, Karena Shaw, John Volpe and Val Shaefer also are part of the ES School. Richard Hebda made valuable contributions to the Restoration Program. Eric Higgs became the Director in 2002.

There is now an extensive program in Ecological Restoration. The ES Law Chair held by Michael M’Gonigle has its own research budget and assistants. Our undergraduate program is one of the oldest in Canada and North America. We have graduated many students, who have earned advanced degrees in other Canadian Universities and elsewhere. We attract students from all over Canada and the world. Many distinctions have been bestowed on our faculty and students. We have a tradition with a high level of energy focused on our shared concern for the natural world and human well being. Our students have contributed many leading edge projects to our school such as solar water heating, and they play a role in campus sustainability and other initiatives. Our School contributes to local and Provincial communities, and also has an international presence. We successfully recommended persons for Lansdowne Fellowships such as Arne Naess in 1988 and Visiting Scholars and Honorary Degrees such as Merve Wilkinson in 2005. Faculty members like Nancy Turner, who came in 1990, have won many national and international honours. Turner was our first tenured Full Professor. She introduced many new courses such as ES 321 Ethnoecology, ES421 Ethnobotany: Plants and Human Cultures, and ES 423 Traditional Systems of Land and Resource Management. She has done extensive research with first nations’ cultures in BC. In 2010 she was awarded the Order of Canada for her work. She earlier received the Order of British Columbia in 1999 for her distinguished scholarship and work with BC’s aboriginal people.

When we started Environmental Studies in 1974, we had a budget of \$2500 with no space or FTEs of our own. We can look back with great satisfaction at the distance we have traveled as an academic community devoted to deep and sustainable values that benefit humans and our companion beings on planet Earth. There have been many exciting and important events, lectures and conferences we have sponsored, that have not been mentioned here, as well as other courses developed, such as those related to sustainability and restoration.

There is now a resurgence of public support for environmental actions similar to the early 1970s. There is action in government and society to address the complex problems and issues like global warming and loss of biological and cultural diversity. Through the years we realized in ES that we were helping to bring about a major transition in our society and personal lives. We realized in the 1970s that we could not go on with business as usual. The Earth's ecosystems have limits. Our population effects are magnified by industrial technologies and massive fossil fuel use not designed for or compatible with long term sustainability. We need to change our policies and practices to live more wisely and to avoid major degradation of our life support systems. The ultimate aim of higher learning is a life time commitment to creative inquiry and high *quality of life*. The environmental crisis calls on us to respect the complex values of our ecological communities and honour our responsibilities to each other and other beings. We can shift our focus to quality of life issues, while we lower our impacts on the environment. With wise design of lifestyles *and* practices, we can have a high quality of life and a much lower impact on the world. How we treat the natural world is a shared concern related to peace and social justice. Caring for our home place and the Earth is an obligation that transcends our generation, cultures, nations and special interests.

In the early years of the environmental movement there was a wide consensus on how to proceed. The activists then (as now) came from all areas on the political and cultural spectrums. *Environmental quality should not be a partisan matter*. We recognize the critical importance of our shared home, and the inestimable value of its treasured places as common goods to be cared for responsibly by *all of us*. We recognize that although people have different personal philosophies, worldviews, religions and political views, *we can cooperate for the common good* of our shared Earth. The environment is not a special interest but our common home. Nations recognize that cooperation to protect the natural world is necessary across all national, cultural and religious boundaries. We should be in a race for excellent care of the Earth and all beings. Movements are always changing and adapting to the conditions of our world. Laws and policies need to evolve, as well as our actions in our home places. The front of the environmental movement is long and deep. There is something we each can do to improve quality of life, our relations with each other and with the Earth. Our Landsdowne Lecturer Arne Naess suggested we can do this if we each act *beautifully* by giving back more than we receive from our Earth Household Places.

Alan Drengson is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Adjunct Professor of Environmental and Graduate Studies at the University of Victoria in Canada. His areas are Eastern philosophy, comparative religion, environmental philosophy and multicultural technology studies. He teaches and practices meditation disciplines aiming for harmony with Nature, such as Aikido. He loves wild dancing, skiing, wilderness journeying and mountaineering. He has published many articles and books (for example, *The Practice of Technology*, *Beyond Environmental Crisis* and *Wild Way Home*) and recently finished two book manuscripts *Caring for Home Place* and *Being at Home with One's Self*. He is author of *Doc Forest and Blue Mt. Ecostery* an ecotopian novel, and of three poetry books the *Sacred Journey Series*. He is Associate Editor for the 10 Volume *Selected Works of Arne Naess* published by Springer in 2005. He is coeditor of five anthologies: *The Philosophy of Society*; *The Deep Ecology Movement*; *Ecoforestry: The Art and Science of Sustainable Forest Use*; *Ecology of Wisdom: Writings by Arne Naess*; and *Wild Foresting: Practicing Nature's Wisdom*. He is founding editor of the online journal *The Trumpeter: Journal of Ecosophy* and of the journal *Ecoforestry*. He does workshops in the *Wild Way*, and presented in the Massey Symposium at the University of Toronto's Massey College in March 2005. In spring 2008 he was Visiting Professor in Canadian Studies at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby BC and taught "Multiculturalism, Sense of Place and Personal Identity". Email: alandren@uvic.ca. For samples of his work see www.ecostery.org and <http://trumpeter.athabascau.ca>.