

Conference Strand: Sustainable Environment  
“Greening the Habitats of the Heart”  
Terril L. Shorb  
Prescott College Adult Degree Program Core Faculty,  
Sustainable Community Development Coordinator

Abstract

Recent polls show that Americans both generally support policies to conserve the natural environment and also are spending less time in nature. Similarly, though people place a high value on social activity, the facts reveal a significant decline in social networks. There is therefore much good work to be done by environmental and sustainability educators to help people restore their connections to both other-than-human and human neighbors in their home communities. Terril L. Shorb, the author, shares elements of the “Butterfly Curriculum”—heart of the Sustainable Community Development (SCD) track he founded at Prescott College in 1997—to show how this approach attempts to address the disconnection stated above. The paper first sketches how aspects of consumerist culture distract people from direct connection to local nature and sociality. Focus then shifts to beneficial effects of bringing nature into the daily lives of community residents to help restore people’s relationships to the natural environment and each other. Finally, examples are offered of the author’s students using the Sustainable Community Development framework to green the habitats of the heart.

A 2005 Harris Interactive Poll found 74 percent of U.S. adults agreeing that “protecting the environment is so important that requirements and standards cannot be too high.” One might conclude Americans understand how healthy ecosystems relate to their own well-being. However, another public survey on the Gallup Organization website (2006) shows that in the past four years, concern for the environment slipped

from first to third place “as the problem Americans predict to be the most important facing the country 25 years from now.”

Similarly, in a presentation online of its “New American Dream Poll” by Widmeyer Research and Polling (2004), findings revealed that people ranked “living in harmony with the environment” 15th of 21 factors most important to achieving the ideal American dream. The top five categories were freedom, happiness, family, equality of opportunity for all, and peace. Interestingly, in an informal poll by this author of attendees to his presentation at the NAAEE conference, only three of 23 identified nature as one of the “top three or four things most important to your quality of life.”

A similar disconnection from social activity was noted (2006) by McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears, who found that in the past 20 years Americans have lost discussion partners “from both kin and outside the family. The largest losses...have come from the ties that bind us to community and neighborhood”

Why this progressive estrangement from local nature and local social networks? Fifteen years of working with community-based adult learners in higher education, and experience as a small press publisher of wildlife books, helped me to uncover two clues. First, people have less experience of local nature. A Roper ASW poll reported online that though 87 percent of Americans engaged in outdoor activity in 2003, participation in 21 of 37 categories declined since 2001. Further, “four in ten young adults [were] likely to engage in recreation either less than monthly or never.” Coupled with actual loss of 34 million acres of forests and fields between 1982 and 2001, people literally have less nature to experience. We thus suffer “extinction of experience” which Robert Michael Pyle (1993) describes as “a state of personal alienation from nature in which many people live”

Another clue is that distraction from nature and other humans relates to increased busyness related to material and media consumption. My experience as a media professional demonstrated the power of media's agenda-setting function, which is less that media tell us what to think than what to think about. What media entice us to think about emerges in analysis of advertising patterns. Media buyers in 2005 spent over \$100 billion on advertising in America and the top four categories were automotive, retail, telecommunications (including internet), and financial services. That last category is no surprise in a society that in 2006 saw outstanding consumer credit rise to \$2.186 trillion, of which \$820 billion is debt on credit cards.

These distressing phenomena are not irreversible, and I'll share how my students and I utilize the "Butterfly Curriculum" in the Sustainable Community Development (SCD) degree track—in Prescott College's Adult Degree Program—to try to reconnect humans with the natural environment and each other. That process of "greening the habitats of the heart," uses "habitats" to indicate the sphere of interaction among humans and that of human-to-nature interactions.

Interest in those spheres from a sociobiological perspective led the author in 1997 to create the SCD track and its four-winged Butterfly curriculum that carries the SCD perspective within four interrelated realms: the first realm is first because it asserts that only through stewardship of the natural world will humans have a future; the third realm holds that sustainable living requires meaningful interaction among humans to coordinate right relationship with local nature, to create an appropriately scaled and oriented built environment (second realm), and to support day-to-day communication among stakeholders of a community, as well as obligations to future generations by teaching

young people right relationship with nature and with each other as creatures of nature (fourth realm).

All students, including those with the SCD emphasis, participate in the Critical Issues and Applications (CIA) orientation to life-long learning course with Core Faculty such as myself. Students create a personal learning vision and design how it is to be enacted within community. A focus of this life-way mapping is for the student to become well-versed in a body of empirical evidence that appears to confirm Edward O. Wilson's biophilia hypothesis (2002) that humans possess an "innate tendency to be attracted by other life forms and to affiliate with natural living systems."

Students review the work of researchers such as Francis Kuo and William Sullivan (2001) who demonstrated that the presence of trees, grass, and other elements of living nature in inner-city housing developments supports "lower levels of incivility... aggression and violence." Further, students become familiar with the pioneering work of Rachel and Stephen Kaplan whose Attention Restoration Theory has shown that by interacting with the natural environment, people's minds recover from the constant drain of mental exertion common to contemporary society.

In practice, SCD students engage citizens in their respective communities to restore awareness of and respect for the immediate natural environment. Examples include: a student in Lopez Island, Washington who wove elements of the SCD butterfly template into a K-12 school curriculum so students experience local nature through activities on a nearby organic farm and its interface with the natural environment. Another student in Prescott, Arizona works with teachers and students in local efforts to restore a riparian corridor, including planting of native, drought-tolerant shrubs and trees in disturbed areas.

A Pennsylvania-based SCD student has worked with her development company employer to conserve old growth vegetation at development sites and to design the building envelope to minimize impacts on the natural environment and to site homes so residents have direct access to nature trails.

Two students in the SCD track used their learning programs at Prescott College to restore native grasses, wildflowers, and trees on the Standing Rock Sioux reservation in North Dakota. The botanical sanctuary offers tribal elders chances to interact with medicinal plants and to share wisdom with members of younger generations who have never seen the plants.

In the work of the third realm of the Sustainable Community butterfly curriculum, students become versed in an evocative body of empirical research that demonstrates the potency of social interaction. Sheldon Cohen's research, (2003) for example, shows that greater sociability supports "performance of health-enhancing behaviors, and better regulation of emotions and stress-hormone levels...[and] sociability may be linked to [mitigation of] other disease processes as well."

Facilitation of sociality is addressed in the CIA orientation process by inviting students to develop social learning networks through recruiting mentors from professional and other sectors of the community. Students create informed, spirited conversations with prospects to prepare seedbeds of authentic reciprocity within the learning experience. This "big-eared" process serves what Daniel Goleman (2006) calls attunement, the ability to move beyond self-absorption and to pay genuine attention to another, which "orients our neural circuits for connectivity."

By growing social networks, students have initiated community-based projects to enhance social capacity. Examples include: A Mesa, Arizona SCD student who has risen

to leadership of a Community Development Corporation (CDC) which directly involves citizens in projects such as access to and improvement of local trails along canal banks, and efforts to revivify the downtown to encourage residents to walk trails weaving through the business sector, and to trade locally to stimulate community economy.

Another SCD student who lives in communities on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border is creating a micro-finance project to help residents toward sufficiency through start-up businesses that provide goods and services for other local citizens in ways that also harmonize with regional ecosystems.

In a different kind of effort to re-weave frayed sociality in his small community in western Massachusetts, an SCD student invites people unknown to one another to neighborhood dinners, which makes new friendships and eases social isolation.

Finally, a northern New Mexico student shares her learning about permaculture with others who live in her proximity. Her house is a gathering place for an emerging community focused on deeper relationships among humans and with other-than-human neighbors of the wild.

Thanks to my students, I remind myself of Paul Shepard's (1998) assertion: "We can go back to nature because we never left it... We truly are a successful species in our own right that lived in harmony with the earth and its other forms for millions of years... The genome is our Pleistocene treasure that transcends short-term and short-sighted goals. Possibilities lie within us."

My students and I work in Sustainable Community Development to uncover the green perspective within and encourage green practice without—so that we may find peace across humankind and with our companion creatures of the wild. In so doing, we experience the abundance of a heart at home in the habitats of the good green Earth.

Reference List:

- Cohen, Sheldon, Doyle, William J., Turner, Ronald, Alper, Cuneyt M., and Skoner, David P. Sociability and susceptibility to the common cold. Psychological Science, 14 (2003): 389-395.
- Endicott, Craig R. 2006. Leading national advertisers report. Advertising Age 51: 1-103. <http://www.adage.com/> (accessed October 28, 2006).
- Goleman, Daniel. Social intelligence: The new science of human relationships. New York, Bantam Books, 2006.
- Kuo, Frances E. and Sullivan, William C. Environment and crime in the inner city. Environment and Behavior 33 (2001): 343-367.
- McPherson, Miller, Smith-Lovin, Lynn, & Brashears, Matthew E. Social isolation in America: Changes in core discussion networks over two decades. American Sociological Review, 71 (2006): 353—375.
- Nie, Norman H., and Lutz Erbring. Internet and society: A preliminary report. IT & Society 1 (2002): 275-283.
- Pyle, Robert Michael. The thunder tree: Lessons from an urban wildland. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1993.
- Shepard, Paul. Coming home to the pleistocene. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1998.
- Shorb, Terril L. The four realms of the core curriculum in the sustainable community development program. Sustainable Ways, 3 (2005): 1-16.
- Wilson, Edward O. The future of life. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002.