

Comment

Creating links between art and environmental education

Robert W. Turner

Artists have used the environment as a subject forever—think of the many examples of cave art depicting animals and other features of the artists' natural environments—and there is a long history of artists whose works affect peoples' awareness of and perceptions of their natural environments. Examples related to my own scholarship on America's national park system include the Thomas Moran paintings of Yellowstone and the Ansel Adams photographs of Yosemite. If we broaden the definition of art to include literature, there is of course a long history of works important to environmental studies. But only relatively recently have other artists become part of the modern environmental movement and of efforts to educate college students and the population at large about environmental issues. Environmental studies programs need to take advantage of this increased interest on the part of artists, and global warming provides a perfect vehicle.

Art whose purpose is at least partly to promote environmental awareness and environmental education now seems to be everywhere. Examples I have recently become aware of include Dialog:City, an arts and cultural event inspired by the occasion of Denver hosting the Democratic national convention; spurse, a collective that comes up with forms of interdisciplinary research methods and practices, including the arts; the conference on art and the environment being held at the Nevada Museum of Art next month; Avant-Guardians, "textlets" on art and ecology written by Linda Weintraub with Skip Schuckmann; the Canary Project, large-scale photographs of landscapes throughout the world depicting environments dramatically affected by global climate change; and, again expanding the definition of the arts to include writing projects, an online anthology called Thoreau's Legacy: American Stories about Global Warming. And this is just a small subset of all the projects going on across the country and around the world. Closer to home, we have the EcoArtTech project of Colgate's own Christine Nadir and Cary Peppermint as another great example of how art is being created about "the environmentality of modern life," as they put it.

A few academic programs in environmental studies include significant elements from the arts. But, aside from literature, most programs focus on the natural and social sciences, history, and ethics. Colgate's program fits this description as well, but in the last couple of years we have worked with faculty in the arts to take advantage of our mutual interests. Last year we co-sponsored along with the art and art history department a year-long series of events called Creative Solutions for Sustainable Futures, a forum that creatively explored issues of global warming and sustainability through interdisciplinary approaches that merged the sciences and new media art technologies. Events included symposia, performances, and exhibitions, with tie-ins to classes in art and also in environmental studies. Colgate's new Ho Science Center features large-scale photographs from the Canary Project. Students have worked on digital art and video projects related to environmental activism and environmental studies. In this year's senior seminar in environmental studies, jointly taught by professors of biology and English, students will write about their sense of place and also do digital storytelling, producing audio and video projects. The environmental studies program is inviting musicians and artists as part of its regular speaker series, and the art and art history department is inviting members of spurse to talk about their work. We are working together to find curricular connections as well. The most promising option for us seems to be linked courses: students simultaneously take courses in environmental studies and in art, and the professors work together to link the material of the two courses in meaningful ways.

Other environmental studies programs will find their own ways to bring art into the curriculum. What works best will depend on the interests of the particular faculty members and students at each school.

But every program needs to find some way of including links between art and environmental education. The issue of global climate change provides a wonderful opportunity. When discussed in terms of global mean temperature, meteorological patterns, and even sea level rise, global warming can seem remote and abstract. Visual images, like those of the Canary Project or the images of polar bears in the Arctic that have been so prevalent recently, bring home the problem much more viscerally. Personal stories, like those in Thoreau's *Legacy*, complement the more abstract analysis of most natural and social scientists.

As academia has become more cognizant of the multiple ways in which people learn, environmental studies programs need to take advantage of the expertise in visual learning of the artistic community. Luckily, the artistic community is very interested and there are so many ways to make the connection that every program should be able to find one appropriate to their local situation.

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