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## **Study mixes moss, inmates**

JOHN DODGE

Evergreen State College professor Nalini Nadkarni has solidified her standing as the No. 1 science ambassador in South Sound with an unusual yet successful outreach program at Cedar Creek Corrections Center near Littlerock.

Nadkarni, a world-renowned tree canopy researcher -- and one of my favorite scientists -- is working with prisoners on a moss-growing project.

That's right. Minimum-security inmates with 18 months or less to serve on their prison terms are experimenting with different ways of growing four species of moss.

You might ask: Why moss? And why inmates? Nadkarni has the answers. Moss is one of those secondary forest products commercially harvested for use in floral arrangements and bouquets. It happens to be a \$165 million a year business, but recent research suggests that moss is being harvested faster than it can reproduce.

This is bad news for forest health because moss intercepts water and nutrients used by trees, and provides habitat for a host of invertebrates, birds and mammals, Nadkarni said.

"So I thought it would be a good idea to learn how to farm mosses, rather than mine them from the wild," she said.

Then she decided that prisons and prisoners might be a good place to start the moss farming experiment.

"They have a lot of space and time, and they don't need sharp tools to work with moss," she said. She also thought the project might be emotionally and spiritually uplifting for inmates, and, if successful, might provide a livelihood for prisoners when they are released.

### Securing the concept

She secured several thousand dollars for the project from the National Geographic Society and the National Science Foundation. Both groups liked the novel concept, bringing the academic world and

science to a prison setting.

Still, there was some doubt a year ago when the project began. "I expected the inmates to roll their eyes and say, 'Please, who is this crazy scientist?' " she said.

But leave it to Nadkarni and her infectious enthusiasm to carry the day.

"It's been very fascinating," Cedar Creek Corrections Center Superintendent Dan Picholke said. "The inmates have responded real well. It's a lot of fun for them, and it's also meaningful work." About 12 to 15 inmates have participated in the moss-growing project, including Leonelo Martinez, 34, who has nine more months to serve before he can go home to his wife and daughter in Elma and his job gathering salal in the woods.

"It's been very nice working with these people," Martinez said, referring to Nadkarni and Evergreen student interns who meet with the inmates regularly.

The inmates have grown moss in various mediums, including mesh bags, chunks of big-leaf maple and in trays.

In the next phase of the experiment, growing sheds will be constructed at the corrections center and on the college campus so students and prisoners can conduct the same studies.

"I applaud Nalini for connecting the prison community with the academic world," Picholke said.

### **Mixing science, public**

Nadkarni has a propensity for bringing science to the public -- and, in this case, prisoners, in new and oddball ways.

She has spoken to several South Sound congregations about trees and spirituality.

She has crafted baseball cards that encourage youngsters to study trees.

She has hauled artists, state legislative aides, disabled people, musicians and others high into the tree canopy for bird's-eye views of the place where sun, rain and mist meet the treetops.

Now she's working with inmates and moss.

The wonders never cease when Nadkarni dreams and schemes and reaches out to yet another new audience.

John Dodge is a senior reporter and Sunday columnist for The Olympian. He can be reached at 360-754-5444 or [jdodge@olympia.gannett.com](mailto:jdodge@olympia.gannett.com).

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