

The Sustainable Prisons Project

By Rebecca Finkel

Most of us probably do not imagine that the daily activities of an incarcerated individual involve working in organic gardens, raising endangered frogs, or cultivating native prairie plants. Nalini Nadkarni is working to change that. Through the Sustainable Prisons Project, Nadkarni, of Evergreen State College (Olympia, WA), is injecting the prison system with a healthy dose of science and sustainability.

In 2002, she embarked on a project to harvest the mosses from old growth forests of the Pacific Northwest, and realized she needed a group of people in a controlled environment to aid her in this work. At the same time, the Washington State Department of Corrections wanted to reduce its prisons' impact on the environment. And so a union between the Department of Corrections and Evergreen State College was formed. Through the Sustainable Prisons Project, Nadkarni is recruiting the inmates as partners in her moss project, and the university is guiding the Department of Corrections in the process of "greening" their facilities.

Through the efforts of these two institutions, groups of male and female prisoners at four different prisons in the state of Washington are working on conservation projects and obtaining valuable green-collar job training. Kelli Bush, the project manager of the Sustainable Prisons Project, discusses the significance of the project: "Prisoners and prisons have been overlooked as partners in sustainability and conservation efforts. The Sustainable Prisons Project has demonstrated that including inmates in this type of work has many rewards."

One of the "rewards" is introducing prisoners to possible career and educational opportunities. Most of the prisoners involved in the project will be released. With the training and experience gained through this program, prisoners involved in the project have an opportunity to acquire new skills, while breaking with the actions or circumstances that led to their incarceration. Additionally, there have already been noticeable improvements in the lives and attitudes of the inmates involved in the project. Among the participants in the program, the Department of Corrections has seen a reduction in the types of violent altercations that cost the prison system time and money.



Nalini Nadkarni, whose expertise is forest ecology, discusses the benefits of the program in-person.



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"Prisoners and prisons have been overlooked as partners in sustainability and conservation efforts," Kelli Bush, project manager of the Sustainable Prisons Project, commented on the significance of the program.

The prisons have also profited from a transition to more sustainable models. The project has initiated composting programs and established organic gardens, resulting in a major reduction in waste. One of the prisons involved in the project avoided the costs associated with the construction of an expensive waste treatment facility after seeing a dramatic decrease in waste.

The Sustainable Prison Project is also making specific efforts to introduce inmates to the field of arboriculture. Educators from around the country are providing lectures to the prisoners, and Nadkarni has focused some of these lectures on the different career paths and opportunities for arborists. The response to these lectures has been enthusiastic; about seventy percent of the inmates in attendance at her lectures expressed interest in continuing their education and eventually taking ISA certification exams. Inmates can use their time working with the project as field experience for ISA's certification requirements. ISA is proud to take part in this effort and has donated several copies of the *Arborists' Certification Study Guide* to the project to aid inmates in achieving their career and educational goals.

Individual arborists from around the country are becoming involved in the project as well. Kelli Bush shared the story of one of the volunteers who grew up in east Los Angeles, California, and was headed toward a life of crime, but instead chose to become an ISA Certified Arborist. This arborist relates to the lives of many of the inmates, and will serve as a significant role model. He plans to assist prisoners in staying on track to become certified upon their release. Nalini Nadkarni has received inquiries from other states seeking to pilot the project in their own prisons, and the expansion of this project will foster more of these unique connections and opportunities for rehabilitation.

Although the project initially began as a partnership between the Evergreen State College and the Department of Corrections, it has since evolved into a collaboration between many organizations. In an effort to increase the population of the endangered Oregon spotted frog, the Department of Fish and Wildlife has joined the project. Prisoners are also raising prairie plants native to the Pacific Northwest for the Department of Defense. Other partners include

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the Nature Conservancy, the National Science Foundation, ISA, and professionals in the field of arboriculture. And, of course, the project relies heavily on the individual prisoners who are, in many ways, the backbone of the research, as they provide both the labor and the inspiration for the program.

The project has found immense success thus far, as measured by the experiences of individual prisoners involved and the contributing institutions' shift toward sustainability. However, the project is still subject to the tribulations of the present economic climate. Various organizations involved with funding the program, including the Department of Corrections, are facing severe budget cuts.

Though these organizations are still important partners in the work of Nadkarni's projects, Evergreen has begun the process of looking for alternative sources of funding.

For further information on how to become involved in the project, or if you have ideas for funding and grant sources, please visit the organization's website (www.sustainableprisons.org).

Rebecca Finkel is an ISA Educational Products Coordinator.

ISA Member News (continued from page 45)

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