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Raising Frogs for Freedom, Prison Project Opens Doors

Matthew Ryan Williams for The New York Times

Taylor Davis, left, and Carri LeRoy counted frogs to be released near the Cedar Creek prison in Littlerock, Wash.

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LITTLEROCK, Wash. — The birdman of Alcatraz became famous. But the frogmen of Cedar Creek are still anonymous beyond the tiny cult world of amphibian science. For now, they say.

Mat Henson, 25, serving a four-and-a-half-year sentence for robbery and assault, and his research partner, Taylor Davis, 29, who landed in the Cedar Creek

Corrections Center here in central Washington for stealing cars, raised about 250 Oregon spotted frogs in the prison yard this summer.

Working with biologists, Mr. Henson is now helping write a scientific curriculum for other frog-raisers, in prison or out. A previous inmate in the program, released some years ago, is finishing his Ph.D. in molecular biology.

When asked about his plans after he is released from prison in 2014, Mr. Henson paused only a moment. “Bioengineering,” he said.

The state program that connected the dots — or rather the felons and the frogs — is called Sustainability in Prisons. Nationally, it is unique in enlisting inmates to help rescue imperiled species like the Oregon spotted frog, which is threatened across much of its range. Who really gets saved, though, is an open question.

“A prison, when you stop to think about it, is a place that should be able to contribute beyond just locking people up,” said Dan Pacholke, the Washington State director of prisons, who helped found the project in 2004 when he was superintendent at Cedar Creek, a minimum-security 500-bed prison. He still jointly directs the project from his office in the capital, Olympia.

The program’s broader goal of bringing nature and sustainable practices to prisons is echoed across the nation as states seek ways to run prisons more cost-effectively.

Utilitarian practicality led Wisconsin in 2008 to begin having inmates grow much of their own food. And federal energy rules are pushing the goal of zero-net energy use in federal prisons by 2030.

Indiana and Massachusetts have become aggressive in reducing energy and water consumption and waste in their prisons, and tough renewable energy mandates in California are pushing alternative generation and conservation at prisons there, said Paul Sheldon, a senior adviser at Natural Capitalism Solutions, a Colorado-based nonprofit that works with government agencies and companies on sustainability issues.

Mr. Pacholke can rattle off statistics. The amount of waste generated per offender in Washington State has fallen from 2.9 pounds a day in 2004 to 1.5 last year through inmate-operated recycling and composting.

Because of practices like collecting rainwater, use of potable water has dropped by 100 million gallons a year even as inmate populations have increased.

But Washington State’s overlay of science — offenders in four state prisons work on projects involving the spotted frogs (Rana pretiosa), wild prairie grasses and butterflies — is also addressing a budget gap in habitat restoration and ecology.

Matthew Ryan Williams for The New York Times

Signs hang outside the tanks where Oregon spotted frogs, a threatened species, are raised at the Cedar Creek prison.

Matthew Ryan Williams for The New York Times

Inmates there tended a garden, one way states are seeking to run prisons more cost-effectively.

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Oregon spotted frogs at the Cedar Creek prison.

The prisoners, who trained with a state biologist but also learned from one another, must compete to enter the program and maintain a record of perfect behavior to stay in it. They are paid 42 cents an hour, standard prison wages, for 10-hour workdays that involve sometimes tedious tasks like monitoring the frogs' water temperature or harvesting the hundreds of crickets grown for frog food — something that even an oppressed graduate student might avoid at real wages.

But there may be some intangible benefits for inmates who are being exposed to the scientific process, many of them for the first time, said Carri LeRoy, a professor of ecology at Evergreen State College in Olympia, and co-director of the Sustainability in Prisons project.

Science, she said, is about procedural order, point A to point B, with every step measured and marked for others to check and follow. And when the focus of that work is a creature that undergoes a profound metamorphosis from egg to tadpole to adult, the lesson is also one about the possibilities of change. In a prison, Professor LeRoy said, that is a big deal.

“This image of transformation, I think, allows them maybe to understand their own transformation,” Professor LeRoy said.

This week at Cedar Creek the day finally arrived, anticipated by inmates and scientists alike, for the frogs to leave their tanks and go off into the wild, six months after hatching.

Their new home is Muck Creek, about 90 minutes away in an area of the Joint Base Lewis-McChord military compound near Olympia. Scientists and volunteers in waders and rolled-up jeans carried the boxes to the water’s edge. Tree frogs, one of five or so frog species on the base, chirruped from the sidelines.

“Get out of here, you’re free!” said Andrea Martin, a graduate student at Evergreen State College who has been working with the inmates at Cedar Creek. She held up one of the frogs in a swampside goodbye, then carefully opened her hand.

The frog leapt and was gone.

Yet it was a moment that Mr. Henson and Mr. Taylor could not witness. Military rules barred the inmates from participating in an event on Department of Defense property.

Both men said they understood. Rules define prison life, they said.

The frog shed is only a few yards from the chain-link and razor-wire prison enclosure. As the frogs were netted, counted, placed in plastic bins and carried out to an S.U.V. for transport, Mr. Henson said he would picture his slimy charges finally swimming free.

“It’s a good feeling to know they’re going to be released,” he said as one furtive frog, hiding motionless in a dark corner of the tub, was fished out. “When you go to a zoo, you see the animals; they’re not really happy.”

With the frogs gone, it was time to start preparing for next year. Over the winter, Mr. Davis and Mr. Henson will rebuild the frog shed’s roof so that by March, when the next eggs arrive, a sun-and-shade system will be in place that better mimics the world the frogs are bound for.

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/28/us/raising-frogs-for-freedom-prison-project-opens-doors.html?_r=1&ref=science

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