

ADVOCACY

Sustainability Science Advocacy in Lockdown America

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Peter C Little

New Terrain for Engaged Environmental Anthropology?



Inmate assisting with an SPP Tour. Photo courtesy Sustainability in Prisons Project

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ABOUT AN

AN Home
Announcements
Calendar
Contributing Editors and Columnists
Editorial Office
Essay and Column Guidelines
Obituary Guidelines
Past Issues
Policies
Style Guide



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New Terrain for Engaged Environmental Anthropology? By Peter Little

Frogs, butterflies, bees, flowers and vegetable gardens. These are generally not forms of life one includes when pondering the environment of the contemporary prison-industrial complex, but there is a growing trend toward prison-based environmental conservation and sustainability science projects in the US. As part of the general greening of prisons and providing science and environmental education opportunities for incarcerated Americans—now around 2.3 million—the Sustainability in Prisons Project (SPP), a partnership between Evergreen State College and the Washington State Department of Corrections (DOC), has become the most vibrant project in the country to mesh the cultures of sustainability science and corrections. Fascinated by this emerging project, I began interviewing SPP staff at the start of 2013 and use this commentary to reflect on the possible inroads for anthropology amid this new domain of sustainability science advocacy.

Sustainability in Prisons Project

The SPP's goal is rather straightforward: "Our mission is to bring science and nature into prisons. We conduct ecological research and conserve biodiversity by forging collaborations with scientists, inmates, prison staff, students, and community partners. Equally important, we help reduce the environmental, economic, and human costs of prisons by inspiring and informing sustainable practices." Among its many accomplishments, the SPP's projects have saved corrections facilities millions of dollars by creating recycling and energy saving programs and they have made major progress in restoring populations of an endangered species of frogs (eg, Oregon Spotted Frogs) and rearing endangered butterflies (eg, Taylor's checkerspot butterflies). The SPP's partners continue to grow, but some prominent players include The Nature Conservancy, the National Science Foundation, US Department of Defense, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Center for Natural Lands Management.

Established in 2005 in Washington state, the SPP has already helped develop sustainability projects in prisons in 14 states and is quickly gaining international attention, with three countries beginning to adopt SPP's ecological research and biodiversity conservation approach. Engaged in projects at minimum, medium, and maximum security prisons, the SPP works to forge collaborations with prison staff and inmates to carry out a variety of activities, including, but not limited, endangered species and ecological restoration, horticulture, water conservation, green purchasing and procurement, zero waste garbage sorting and composting, as well as bicycle and wheelchair restoration.

Much of the SPP's success, it should be added, is due to the fact that one of the co-founders is now the Director of Prisons for the Washington State Department of Corrections, and as one SPP staff explained, "without him on board and being an advocate for this program, it would never have gotten off the ground."

Inmate Science and Exploitation Avoidance

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault contends that "The prison has always formed part of an active field in which projects, improvements, experiments, theoretical statements, personal evidence and investigations have proliferated" (Foucault 1975: 235). The SPP is one such project with the mission of "bringing nature and science into prisons," an interesting twist of political ecology indeed. In this sense, the SPP might be understood as an experimental project of carceral environmentalism, whereby sustainability science is becoming a "penitentiary technique," as Foucault would have it, that dovetails with the structural power and logic of the prison system.

SPP staff are fully aware of the crux of meshing ecology and corrections, of meshing environmental science and prison culture, and they are also cognizant of the brittle political-economic dimensions of their sustainable practices. As David Harvey famously put it in his *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference* “all ecological projects (and arguments) are simultaneously political-economic projects (and arguments) and vice versa” (Harvey 1996:182). SPP staff are sensitive to the politics of prison labor and “careful,” as one SPP staff put it, “not to take advantage of inmates in the work we do.” This is where the so-called political ecology of prisons gets interesting, the point at which the SPP’s mission “to bring science and nature to prisons” is met with a culture of caring for inmate education and advocating for their involvement in sustainability and conservation projects, as well as in the production of environmental science and knowledge. SPP staff, in this sense, are in a continual navigation of possible exploitation and they are careful to avoid, the best they can, any form of inmate disempowerment. “It can get tricky,” as one SPP staff put it. SPP staff continually highlight the educational component of the SPP and view inmate involvement in SPP projects as “opportunities to contribute” (a Department of Corrections term) and not inmate exploitation. The educational focus, in this sense, counters the prison labor concern which is ultimately an uneasiness with what has been termed “carceral Keynesianism” (Parenti 1999) or how prison labor mimics “public-work style stimulus” (Parenti 1999:217).

Beyond Sustainability

Taking an ethnographic approach to the SPP has inspired me to better understand how SPP staff think about the work they do and how are the benefits of sustainability science and education in prisons understood. From my conversations and interviews thus far, I have found that most SPP staff are interested in environmental issues as much as they are driven by an ethos of community service. While advocating for sustainability practices and science is made explicit—again, the SPP ultimately aims “to bring science and nature into prisons”—many SPP staff also envision their involvement as a meaningful opportunity to work with and learn from “unknown” prisoners, that “hidden population” struggling to sustain a life in a controlled environment where moral rehabilitation and transformation is a targeted institutional goal. One SPP staff, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Niger, explained, “I saw the SPP as an opportunity to work with a marginalized population that I knew nothing about.” She added, “There are a lot of inmates who show a lot of promise to be environmental leaders and who can go back to their communities and make a difference. They can have a second chance. But most people haven’t been to a prison so they don’t see this side of it. I really am drawn to working with people who

don't get the chance to learn science, to learn about the natural world, and to learn about the place where they live.”

There is also an orbiting ethos of ecotherapy (Hasbach 2012; Buzzell and Chalquist 2009; Clinebell 1996) that informs much of the work that SPP staff do, that building inmate-earth relationships has some level of healing power. For example, I was told by one SPP staff that, “I really feel that to have a physical connection with the planet, whether working with soil or working with frogs, it can only have a beneficial impact on your physical and mental health and wellbeing.” As a microcosm of sustainability “science in action,” as Bruno Latour might put it, the work of the SPP illustrates how spaces of incarceration are becoming simultaneously spaces of environmental science production and sustainability practice. Prisons, in this sense, are becoming places where environmental identities can be made possible and where environmental education is carefully used to reduce recidivism. This transformation process, which the SPP is playing a central role, is a vibrant moment that calls for closer connections between environmental anthropology and the anthropology of prisons.

Toward an Engaged Environmental Anthropology of Prisons

Learning about the SPP has sparked my interests in a plethora of questions that could inspire an engaged environmental anthropology of prisons: How is sustainability science informing the prison-industrial complex? How are inmates actually becoming sustainability scientists? How are prisons becoming a microcosm for how sustainable living and sustainable practices are done and made possible? In a recent conversation with prison anthropologist Lorna Rhodes, she reminded me of the difficulty ethnographers face when attempting to do fieldwork in prisons: “the proposed project really needs to fit with the logic of the prison system. They [the DOC] are only really interested in projects that fit with their needs and interests.” As the primary instigator of the anthropology of prisons, Rhodes (2004, 2001, 1998) is keenly aware of the fact that prisons have long been a topic dominated by scholars in criminal justice studies and sociology and that people in the field of corrections are, as she put it, “very aware” of her work and that of others that look critically at prisons and challenge corrections philosophies and practices. While Rhode’s work has taken a “hard look” at the prison industry, I have used this commentary to begin to explore and take a modest look at the practice of sustainability science advocacy in an environment of incarceration. My approach to studying the SPP is not meant to simply drag such sustainability science advocacy efforts through the mud to expose trenchant power relations, but instead to honor the complexities and conundrums of

advocacy itself, especially “advocacy” driven by “nature” and “science” education, both of which are anchoring motivations for the SPP.

As one SPP staff told me, “I don’t think the SPP has really uniformly taken the time to define nature or science. The SPP was designed by ecologists, not social scientists.” As an engaged environmental anthropologists working to build friendships with SPP staff, I am left pondering: Is this where anthropology comes in? Is this a welcoming entry point for an engaged environmental anthropology of sustainability behind bars? Working with the SPP to explore these questions is a good place to start any ethnographic journey into the greening or ecologization of lockdown America.

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