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A (greener) life behind bars

The Sustainability in Prisons Project transforms prisoners' lives while enriching the planet.

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A Cedar Creek Corrections Center inmate watches over Oregon spotted frogs, which are reared in the prison and released into the wild. (Photo: Cyril Ruoso/SPP)

All across Washington state, a quiet sustainability revolution is taking place. A mostly unseen army of environmentalists has banded together on a vast array of earth-friendly projects,

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everything from raising endangered [Taylor's checkerspot butterflies](#) and launching large-scale recycling programs to rehabilitating troubled shelter dogs so they are more adoptable.

Certainly, it's a wonderful testament to the power of teamwork, but it's not necessarily the stuff of headlines — except for the fact that this army of do-gooders is also doing time. And their sponsor isn't some big-name NGO, but rather the Washington State Department of Corrections (WDOC) and The Evergreen State College (TESC).

Known as the [Sustainability in Prisons Project](#) (SPP), this innovative program that converts criminals into conservationists is the brainchild of [Dan Pacholke](#), deputy secretary for WDOC, and Dr. Nalini Nadkarni, a biology professor at the University of Utah.

“Everybody wants to do things that are meaningful,” says Pacholke. “So we developed this mantra about creating opportunities for inmates to contribute to something bigger than themselves.”

Reimagining prisons

Pacholke was superintendent of the Cedar Creek Corrections Center in Littlerock, Washington, back in 2004 when he met Dr. Nadkarni, then a forest ecologist at TESC. They were attending a banquet, and their conversation that night led to a series of pilot projects at Cedar Creek that paired inmates with students, faculty and prison staff to save the planet.



An inmate feeds Taylor's checkerspot butterfly at Mission Creek Corrections Center. (Photo: Benjamin Drummond and Sara Joy Steele/SPP)

For Pacholke it was the culmination of years spent pondering whether offenders should be punished or rehabilitated.

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“The biggest thing was to start viewing prisons as contributors and participants in the larger community — recognizing there’s some human capital inside,” he says. “You want to create a humane environment where people feel like they can live decent lives for the time they’re incarcerated and work on initiatives that reduce the likelihood they’ll reoffend. Even for people who are never getting out, you want a degree of humanity that allows them to make a contribution — whether it’s raising endangered prairie plants or creating model systems around beekeeping.”

In 2008, WDOC and TESC signed a formal partnership agreement and expanded SPP to other Washington State prisons. Today, all 12 prisons (home to more than 17,000 inmates) boast sustainability programs, and SPP has spread to other states and around the world.

Working across prison walls

In Washington, it’s not unusual to see teams of inmates collaborating side by side with scientists and graduate students. At Cedar Creek, for instance, prisoners work as research assistants, rearing endangered [Oregon spotted frogs](#), monitoring their growth and behavior, and collecting water quality data. Each fall the frogs are released into protected wetlands to help sustain wild populations. In fact, Cedar Creek’s program is one of the most successful in the Pacific Northwest, boasting bigger frogs and higher survivorship rates than many other rearing facilities. “The inmates are meticulous caregivers and record keepers,” says Pacholke. “What it boils down to is they have more time and attention to give.”

In addition to participating in educational classes and contributing to outside community projects (such as growing crops for local food banks and refurbishing bikes for needy children), convicts also help make prison operations more sustainable. Efforts include waste-reduction initiatives, maintaining onsite organic gardens, and overseeing massive worm composting programs. These initiatives have not only boosted energy efficiency and dramatically cut carbon emissions inside Washington’s prison facilities, but they’ve also saved taxpayers significant money — about \$4.3 million in 2012.

Finding redemption

Perhaps most impressive are the life-altering transformations that many inmates undergo.



Inmates Timothy Nuss (second from right) and Jamar Glenn (far right) releasing western pond turtles back into the wild. (Photo: SPP)

“People who come to prison haven’t had a lot of success with education, with a job, or with family,” says Pacholke. “So when they’re working with troubled canines or endangered species, they get a real sense of accomplishment. It shifts the inmate from someone who’s following orders to a collaborator. They find that their notes and observations are important and learn that people are genuinely interested in what they’re doing.”

Pacholke hasn’t collected enough data to measure SPP’s full impact on prisoners’ lives, but he does know that many develop important job skills that help them on the outside. And some even go on to do environmental work. Most impressive is the inmate who coauthored a [paper](#) with Dr. Nadkarni for an international sustainability journal and went on to get his doctorate in biochemistry after being released.

For a few, like Cedar Creek inmate Jamar Glenn, the SPP experience also provides a mirror into their own lives — and a chance for atonement. Recently he [blogged](#) about the similarities between releasing an endangered Western pond turtle that he’d cured of “shell disease” and his own impending release from a 17-year prison stint:

“As she swam away, I thought about my own life. How I also had to go through my own life struggles ever since I was a youngster. I’ve been alone with no assistance. Predators were my enemy (rival gangs). My illness was my addictions (drugs/alcohol), and my loss of habitat was prison ... This program has really enlightened my heart and mind, opening my eyes to a whole new world of opportunity ... Who would’ve thought a turtle’s life was parallel to mine.”

[Watch Dan Pacholke give a TEDx talk.](#)

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