

## Forest ecologist awarded by WSU for advancements in social justice



Corinna Thornton | Evergreen reporter Dec 1, 2015 (0)



After years of working with prison inmates in correction systems and investigating illegal harvesting of moss in the state of Washington, Nalini Nadkarni had been awarded the 2015 William Julius Wilson Award for the Advancement of Social Justice.

[http://www.dailyevergreen.com/news/article\\_688251fe-97f0-11e5-a25d-6b6bc88e6443.html#.VI40SIXfzGw.gmail](http://www.dailyevergreen.com/news/article_688251fe-97f0-11e5-a25d-6b6bc88e6443.html#.VI40SIXfzGw.gmail)

Nadkarni is a Professor of Ecology & Environmental Biology and Ecosystem Science at the University of Utah.

The award was given in recognition of all she has done to contribute to social policy, the promotion of social inclusiveness and reeducation of the jobless.

Nadkarni helped start The Sustainability in Prisons Project to assist studying moss that had been harvested illegally for ages.

This moss was being taken at such an accelerated rate that it was alarming.

“Science has helped us understand that this is not a sustainable industry. The moss takes 20-30 years to grow back,” Nadkarni said.

Nadkarni realized that this was an important issue and that started her on thinking of who would be interested in helping take on a project like that.

“Maybe people who don’t have much access to mosses, are interested in science education, want to have contact with something living, and that’s when I began thinking maybe inmates would be the best possible partners,” Nadkarni said.

Prisoners were a group of people that she thought could be taught about horticulture and would maybe want to learn new skills.

She started knocking on doors and was told no several times before she finally found the Cedar Creek Corrections Center located in Littlerock Washington.

So Nadkarni and her students brought the mosses to the inmates and had them help design the study and didn’t just tell them what to do.

They studied them and every month they would measure and record the samples growth. After 18 months she found two species of moss that grew quickly.

This was the first trial test of the program and it expanded the next year to five additional prisons, one of which was the Coyote Ridge Corrections Center in Connell Washington.

Gretchen Graber received a job description for the Institute for Applied Ecology's sagebrush growing and teaching position via the Columbia Basin Native Plant Society, which she sits on the board for. She applied for the position and was hired by the institute.

"I had worked for the SPP for a year on their sustainable lecture series for Washington State prisons so I was excited for the new opportunity," Graber said.

The inmates from the corrections center ended up planting sage brush in the local area.

"They planted about 20,000 sage brush plants which were very important for the preservation of the close to extinction Greater Sage-Grouse bird," Graber said.

Stacy Moore, Director of Ecological Education Program at the Institute of Applied Ecology, said the program has been a success so far.

They started with the first experimental program and since then have continued to grow and expand operations to other corrections facilities.

"It is such a success because it really gives the inmates something to be proud of. They are happy to be doing something active and contribute to their environment while learning invaluable skills," Moore said.