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Eco-studies are blooming at colleges

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A decade ago, a college program in environmental studies was a rarity. Now, it's one of the hottest majors in academia.

"Five years ago, we graduated five students in environmental studies," says Christopher Klyza, assistant professor of political science at Middlebury College, Vermont. "This year, we're going to graduate 60. It's now the fourth-largest major on campus."

In just a few years, he says, "there's been this explosion" in interest in eco-studies.

The reason, says Dawn Ladanyi, 23, a senior at Cornell University, is "increased environmental awareness. Everywhere, you see global awareness of environmental degradation increasing. That was part of my primary school education, becoming more environmentally aware."

Klyza, who heads up Middlebury's environmental studies program, agrees. "I think the environment is a very near-and-dear issue to a lot of students of this generation, because we're seeing similar kinds of growth at other institutions," he says.

Ladanyi, who is majoring in natural resources with a concentration in wildlife sciences, is among a group of students who spent part of last spring and summer catching, weighing and tagging Atlantic sturgeon in the Hudson River. They were helping professor Mark Bain - known as "The Sturgeon General" - with an ongoing project monitoring the river's sturgeon population. That was a summer job for her but it wasn't all that much different from her classes.

"I'm now in a stream ecology course where we're doing a habitat study, a pre-environmental impact assessment on a stream where there's a development planned nearby," she says. "We're looking at the water chemistry, algal communities, invertebrate communities, using techniques used by professional stream ecologists."

For a student who wants to spend his or her life trying to solve environmental problems, it's not enough to study chemistry or botany or even political science. Today, students know they need all those subjects and more, says Rod Dietert, a senior fellow and acting director of the Cornell Center for the Environment, which brings together faculty and students from across campus for courses taken as electives within traditional programs, or, in some cases, to launch brand-new majors. The interdisciplinary approach is needed, he says, because environmental problems have to be attacked from several angles - political, economic, scientific and public health, to name a few.

"You've got to have something to bring to the table when you graduate," he says, "some kind of expertise you'll bring to a team effort in environmental problem solving."

Right now, "there is so much need for expertise in sorting out where we've got real-life toxicological problems, and to

assess where the environmental risks are," he says. "You need the expertise cutting across disciplines. That sort of knowledge is crucial to making decisions, whether in business or public protection in environmental health."

One way to get expertise is to work on real problems. At Northland College, an "environmental liberal arts college" in Ashland, Wis., where all courses are related to nature and the environment, a class in environmental economics is working with a local paper mill to see if the sludge it generates can be converted into a building material.

Internships and field study also provide experience, says Northland president Robert Rue Parsonage. "One of our concerns here is that students gain both theoretical and practical knowledge, so they have usable skills," he says. Students intern with the U.S. Forest Service or other government agencies, with regional nature centers and with businesses. They can sign up for one-month field trips to the Serengeti in Africa to study wildlife and human interaction, to Jamaica to work on reforestation or to Russia to work with an environmental institution.

The students' commitment to the environment is matched by that of faculty and administrators, says Parsonage. "We're trying hard to work at practicing, as an institution, what we preach," he says. "We try to involve students, faculty and staff in all committees and deliberations on building projects, including renovations and new construction, the way we use the land we have, priorities for expansion. We're trying to improve our environmental practices."

All food and paper waste is composted, he says. "This summer, we will start to develop organic gardens and seedlings using our own compost."

And a student group is helping with plans for renovating a couple of older buildings on the campus. They're "reviewing with the architect our goals, having ongoing monitoring of environmental practices and outcomes. The students force our administrators to have our feet to the fire in terms of these environmental values," says Parsonage. "And that's good."

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