

Environmental Studies Program Flourishing

By Greg Pahl

Described as the fastest growing major at Middlebury College, environmental studies has expanded from fairly modest beginnings to become one of the preeminent programs of its kind in the country. As a ten-year goal, President McCardell would like to see it become *the* preeminent program.

In 1986, there were four environmental studies (ES) graduates; last year, 41; this year there will be around 60. This remarkable growth in the program, according to John Elder, professor of English and until this last June director of the ES program at Middlebury, reflects national trends, as the deepening environmental crisis has caused people to realize many basic assumptions and institutions need to be rethought. Numerous institutions that did not have environmental studies majors before are starting them now, and many students are becoming increasingly motivated to enter this interdisciplinary area. "In fact, some students even choose their college with that in mind," Professor Elder said.

One reason the ES program has been so successful here is that Middlebury College has a long history of leadership in environmental studies. In fact, in 1965 the College founded the nation's first ES major, which was originally grounded in the sciences. But in recent years, the program has expanded to become highly interdisciplinary, with students taking introductory core courses not only in the environmental sciences, but also in environmental policy and environmental literature.

"I think that the environment is an issue that this generation of college students has closely identified with," Christopher McGrory Klyza, assistant professor of political science and the new director of the ES program, said. "I think it's an area that's going to become increasingly important over time as the world's population continues to grow, and we have more and more conflicts over resource use, biodiversity and related issues."

"Without question, our biggest strength in ES is our interdisciplinary philosophy," Professor Klyza continued. "I think, with one or two exceptions, we're the only small liberal arts college in the region that incorporates the humanities, the social sciences and the natural sciences into an ES program. Typically, these programs grew out of a science core, and a lot of the programs at other schools haven't gone much beyond that."

The fact that a political science professor currently directs the program demonstrates that ES at Middlebury is not just an environmental *sciences* program, but, rather, an environmental *studies* program, which encompasses a much broader scope. "Middlebury has a good reputation in environmental studies, and I think the word has gotten out to prospective applicants. They view this as an excellent place to



come for ES," Professor Klyza said.

Yet another attractive feature of ES at Middlebury is the fact that students can take the program as a stand-alone major. At most other institutions it is necessary to take ES as a double major in addition to another field of study. "While that's an option here, some of our students like the fact that you can just be an ES major," Professor Klyza said.

Another reason for the program's success is Vermont's environment, with its mountains, forests, lakes and agricultural activity, as well as its expanding suburbs and ski areas, all of which provide unique opportunities for research in a relatively small geographic area. "Middlebury's location unquestionably draws environmentally oriented students," Professor Klyza said.

One way of making the local environment even more accessible for research would be to establish a summer program. First envisioned by John Elder as a graduate-level environmental institute, the idea currently is evolving into an undergraduate program. "One of the reasons we feel that the summer program would be so valuable is the opportunity it provides for more field courses," Professor Klyza said. "The spring semester is almost a write-off, given the long winter and then mud season. But if we had the summer, it certainly would give us more options."

In his September 19 address, President McCardell stressed the importance of giving students the opportunity to apply what they learn in the classroom to real

world situations. "This is something that we have strongly supported and encouraged for years in ES," Professor Klyza said. "We feel that our students are well served by spending a winter term or a semester away from here in a practical setting."

One indicator of the program's strength at the College is the number and frequency of conferences and speakers, sponsored by ES, that have been on campus recently. "I would assert that the ES program has been involved in more major conferences and has brought more speakers here than any other major program at Middlebury in the last five years," Professor Elder said. A number of those speakers and conferences have raised questions about some of the basic assumptions of the ES program itself.

For many years at the national level, the ES field has generally focused on wilderness and pollution issues, but this has been changing, according to Professor Elder. "We are realizing that the environmental movement has been largely developed in reference to upper-middle-class, white Americans. That doesn't mean that what's happened is bad, it just means that it's limited," he said. "People are realizing that in addition to emphasizing wilderness, we might need to focus more on cities—because that's part of the environment—and on minority groups as well."

Another gradual shift has been the broadening of the emphasis of environmental issues from local to global. "As atmospheric and oceanic issues become

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more pressing and more clearly understood, we realize that every environmental issue is a global issue," Professor Elder said. "Therefore, we have to think globally about things like deforestation, population and oceanic pollution."

Professor Klyza agrees. "While we've covered international issues for some time, much of our focus here at Middlebury has been on American environmental concerns. I think that's rather limiting, and we need to broaden it somewhat."

At Middlebury there is now a great opportunity to connect these broader issues with the Language Schools and to think about study abroad as it relates to ES, according to Professor Klyza. "We send about 25 students to Latin America each year, which, compared to our peer institutions, is a much higher number, and about two-thirds of them are ES majors. As we work towards setting up a program in Latin America, ES is going to be heavily involved."

In recent years, the College administration has come to recognize the emerging strength of the ES program and is responding with increasing support, states Professor Klyza. One obvious sign of that support is the recent centralization of ES offices in Farrell House, including a new part-time secretary and an upstairs seminar/resource room. "We felt that this meeting space was very important, because as an interdisciplinary major we were scat-

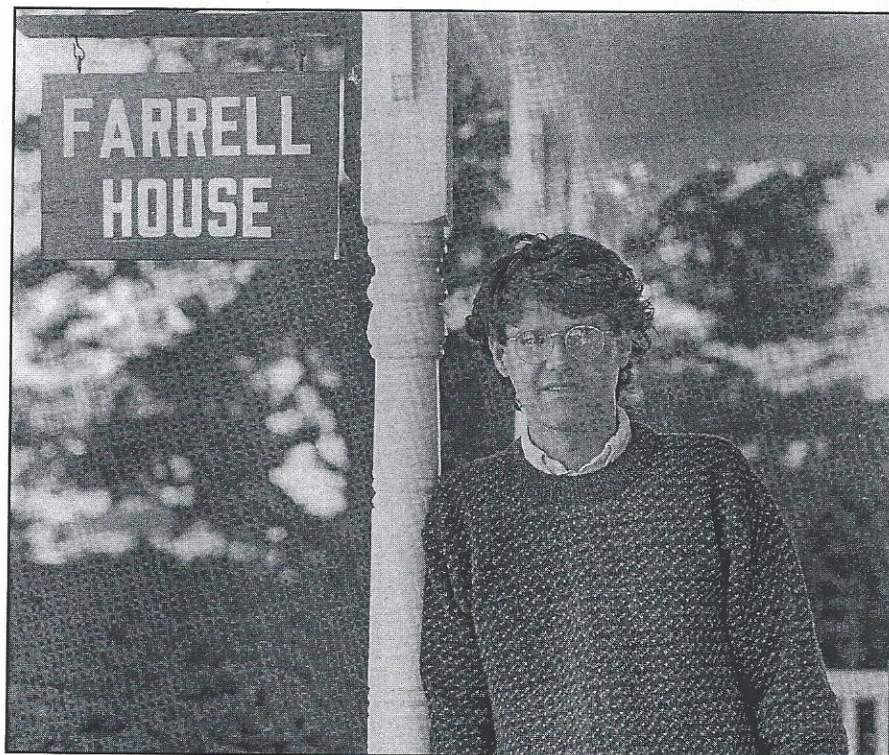
tered all over the campus, and the students needed to have a central place to go," he said.

The dramatic growth of the program has had one drawback, however. Environmental studies has almost been too successful. "We're blessed with having a great deal of student interest," Professor Klyza said. "Unfortunately, as a result of that interest, some of the classes now have as many as 80 to 100 students in them. Many students are bothered by the size of some of the classes—and with good reason. We'd like to be able to bring that number down.

"The way to deal with that is to bring in more resources, and obviously that's difficult in a small liberal arts college, to be adding faculty," Professor Klyza said. "We feel that we still have some gaps in our curriculum—especially in history and ethics—that we'd like to address, and hopefully, by adding instructors and courses, it will help to decrease the enrollment pressures in some of the other classes."

Nevertheless, Middlebury is already a recognized national leader in environmental programs, and the future looks bright with increasing signs of strong support from the administration, according to both Professor Elder and Professor Klyza. "I think ES is already one of the most popular programs at the College; it's one of Middlebury's extraordinary success stories," Professor Elder said. "I believe that within the next few years, when people hear the name Middlebury College, one of the first things they'll think about will be environmental studies, because this is such a growing area of interest nationwide, and one in which we are absolutely positioned to exercise national leadership."

"Our ES students are really excited," Professor Klyza added. "They feel that they are part of an important, evolving and dynamic program." ■



Professor Christopher McGrory Klyza