

# Christian Stewardship in Environmental Education

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## Introduction

When setting foot upon Ferris University's Ryokuentoshi campus, one might notice the signage announcing that it is an eco-campus. The eco-campus components include wind turbines, composting, solar water heaters, biotopes, and more (Ferris University Eco-Campus Workshop, n.d.). However, Ferris University is a Christian university. Is there a conflict between Christianity and ecology? Or does Christianity encourage respect for ecology and stewardship of the natural environment?

Lynn White, Jr., in his 1967 article in *Science* magazine, stated that environmental problems have been caused by man's belief that he has dominion over the earth due to the anthropocentric Christian view that the universe was created by God for man. In his 2015 *Encyclical on Climate Change and Inequality: On Care for Our Common Home*, the most widely known Christian, Pope Francis, acknowledged this mindset of the past while encouraging the role of stewardship now and into the future. This indicates that, if White was correct about Christianity's contribution to environmental degradation in the past, then there now appears to be a shift toward environmental stewardship in the Christian community. In exploring this shift, a small Christian university in the United States with a nationally certified environmental education program will be highlighted in this paper.

The North American Association of Environmental Educators (NAAEE) promotes environmental education and offers certification programs to

improve environmental education programs. In particular, the NAAEE has an Accreditation for Distinguished Higher Education Program (Higher Education and NAAEE, n.d.). One of the four colleges to receive this certification is Montreat College, a small Christian university in western North Carolina (Higher Education and NAAEE, n.d.). There are several other colleges and universities in the western North Carolina area that offer degrees or concentrations in environmental studies, environmental science or ecology, and environmental health. These include large public institutions such as the University of North Carolina at Asheville and Western Carolina State University as well as small private ones such as Warren Wilson College, which offers six majors in its environmental studies department (Academics | Warren Wilson College, n.d.), and Mars Hill University, which offers a minor in environmental studies (Majors & Minors, Academic Divisions, and Departments, n.d.).

Why are so many environmental programs collected in one region of the state? In particular, why would a small Christian university such as Montreat College offer environmental studies and undergo a rigorous certification process? Finally, is there a conflict between Christianity and ecology? To answer these questions, this article will present an explanation of Christian stewardship, a brief history of environmental education in the US, an outline of the NAAEE certification process, and an introduction to western North Carolina before examining the environmental education program at Montreat College and its sustainability practices.

## **Christian Stewardship**

As mentioned above, Lynn White, Jr., raised the issue of a conflict between Christianity and ecology. He believed that in moving away from paganism and animist religions, “Christianity... not only established a dualism

of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends" (White, 1967, p. 4). Furthermore, he stated that, "Both our present science and our present technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecologic crisis can be expected from them alone. Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. We must rethink and refeel our nature and destiny" (White, 1967, p. 6). This was hotly debated, with many of White's critics claiming that Christianity preaches stewardship of the earth, not dominion over it (Riley, 2012, p. 1). Furthermore, in a short talk at Yale University about his dissertation on White, Matt Riley states that White's work demonstrates "the attempts of a scholar working across disciplines to apply his ideas constructively to a problem which he cares deeply about: the worsening ecological crisis and the potential of his own faith, Christianity, to help solve the dilemma" (2012, p. 2).

White called on Christians to emulate Saint Francis, who "tried to substitute the idea of the equality of all creatures, including man, for the idea of man's limitless rule of creation" (1967, p. 6). In response, Jan Boersema argued that Saint Francis was not a model for ecologists for his religious beliefs, given that, "With Francis there is anything but equality among the creatures of the earth: he addresses them with authority, and they obey. He feels at one with the whole of creation, but there is an anthropocentric ring about it all" (2002, p. 71). However, Boersema goes on to say that Francis is a model for environmentalists based on "his relentless offensive against material wealth and thus, implicitly, against the opulence of the ecclesiastical and worldly leaders of his day" (2002, p. 75).

Saint Francis remains "one of the best-known religious figures of all time," and Pope Francis chose his name in honor of him (Warne, 2015,

para.7). Furthermore, in his 2015 *Encyclical on Climate Change and Inequality*, Pope Francis called on the faithful to recognize that, "We are not faced with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather one complex crisis which is both social and environmental" (p. 74). Naomi Oreskes, in her introduction to the *Encyclical*, states that "The core of the argument is that *because* human dignity finds its roots in our common Creation, caring for our fellow citizen and caring for our environment *are the same thing*" (2015, p. X). Sylvia Hood Washington, a Catholic environmental justice scholar, said, "When you have the Pope clearly state that the degradation of the environment and the degradation of human beings is a sin? It's a blessing to every human being who has wanted justice and equity" (Slater, 2015, para. 3). Therefore, if, as White indicated, Christianity has led to the destruction of the earth, there has since been a shift to the extent that the most widely known Christian of our times, Pope Francis, indicates that Christian education can now not only include environmental education but must.

## Environmental Education in the US

According to Carter and Simmons, discussion of resource conservation and habitat preservation began in the United States with the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau in the mid-1800s and carried into the mid-1900s with the work of John Muir and Aldo Leopold. Following World War II, concern for the environment grew, and in 1948, the Conference for the Establishment of the International Union for the Protection of Nature (IUCN) met in France (Carter & Simmons, 2010).

Furthermore, Carter and Simmons noted the impact three books had on the environmental education movements. First, Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* was published in 1949. His book was followed by *Silent Spring*,

published by Rachel Carson in 1962. In 1963, Steward Udall, Secretary of the Interior under President John F. Kennedy, published *The Quiet Crisis*. These three books, as well as the growing protest movements in the US, led to a number of environmental laws being enacted. In 1970, the Environmental Education Act became law (Carter & Simmons, 2010). Section 2 b of this law states:

*IT IS THE POLICY OF THE UNITED STATES TO ESTABLISH AND SUPPORT A PROGRAM OF EDUCATION ON THE ENVIRONMENT, FOR STUDENTS AND PERSONNEL WORKING WITH STUDENTS, THROUGH ACTIVITIES IN SCHOOLS, INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION, AND RELATED EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES, AND TO ENCOURAGE POSTSECONDARY STUDENTS TO PURSUE CAREERS RELATED TO THE ENVIRONMENT (US EPA, n. d.).*

This led to the growth of environmental education programs in the United States.

## **NAAEE Certification**

In 1971, the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) was founded. The NAAEE is an organization for environmental educators in North America. According to their website, the NAAEE has more than 16,000 members in the United States, Canada, and Mexico as well as members in 30 other countries (Higher Education and NAAEE, n.d.). The NAAEE has existed for more than 40 years but started its certification program for universities and colleges in 2014 as a means of setting standards within the field of environmental education (Higher Education and NAAEE, n.d.). Among other benefits of the certification program, the NAAEE believes accreditation will attract new students to a certified university's environmental education program and retain current ones, provide evidence

of a program's excellence, document a program's impact for university-wide reviews, demonstrate that graduates are well-qualified, and assure alumni and supporters that a program has high standards (Higher Education and NAAEE, n.d.). Since starting this program, four colleges and universities have been accredited by NAAEE. These are Montreat College, Eastern Kentucky University, NOVA Southeastern University, and University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point.

The requirements for the NAAEE Accreditation for Distinguished Higher Education Program encompass six themes. The first is environmental literacy, which includes knowledge of environmental processes, understanding of environmental issues, and civic responsibility (NAAEE, 2014, p. 7). The second is foundations of environmental education, which includes understanding "the goals, theory, practice and history of environmental education" (NAAEE, 2014, p. 7). Next is professional responsibilities, which includes ongoing professional development and an understanding of the distinction between education and advocacy (NAAEE, 2014, p. 7). Fourth is planning and implementing environmental education, which includes knowledge of learning, materials, teaching methodology, lesson planning, and curriculum design (NAAEE, 2014, p. 7). Fifth is fostering learning, which includes creating "an inclusive and collaborative learning environment," particularly for understanding different views and positions on controversial issues (NAAEE, 2014, p. 8). Last is assessment and evaluation, which includes not only learner outcomes and assessment but also program evaluation and improvement (NAAEE, 2014, p. 8).

For all six themes, the following conditions must be met: descriptions of courses or experiences where students can learn the skills in the themes, how the themes are taught in the courses, how participants are assessed, how participants are evaluated on the assessments, and a summary of results

of the participants demonstrating competency in the courses (NAAEE, 2014, pp. 14-17). To receive accreditation, the program design alignment and the assessment alignment must be rated acceptable or higher (NAAEE, 2014, p. 20). Data on course instructors and program participants are also collected as part of the review process (NAAEE, 2014, p. 11). The certification process is renewed every five years (NAAEE, 2014, p. 5). Universities that are not successful are provided feedback on what they need to improve to receive certification (NAAEE, 2014, p. 6). All information is self-reported by the universities, and the data are reviewed by a committee of NAAEE members (NAAEE, 2014, p. 5). The NAAEE does not provide information about how many institutions have applied for the certification; however, the four that have been certified are listed on the NAAEE website.

## **Western North Carolina**

Western North Carolina has a long history of tourism for health and recreation. The Blue Ridge Mountains, which are part of the Appalachian range, are located in the western part of North Carolina. Due to its fresh air and beauty, the Blue Ridge Mountain area became popular for health, particularly for people with tuberculosis, and recreation in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (National Park Service, n.d.). In the late 1880's, George W. Vanderbilt visited the area and subsequently built a summer home, called Biltmore House, near Asheville (Biltmore History | Biltmore, n.d.). Vanderbilt invited the forester Gifford Pinchot to create a forest management plan for his land. After working for Vanderbilt for three years, Pinchot left and later went on to become the first Chief of the United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service and Governor of Pennsylvania (History, 2012).

In 1895, Carl Schenck was invited to come to Biltmore House from Germany to manage the forests (Bonesteel, 2015). Schenck was a proponent

of sustainability and implemented many European forestry techniques that had not yet been used in America. Many of the people he trained asked about his methods, and this led to the founding of the first American School of Forestry. Although the school later closed, Schenck's contributions to the field of forestry and the importance and significance of the first School of Forestry led to the Asheville area becoming known as the Cradle of Forestry (The Forest History Society, 2015). The Pisgah National Forest, which appears to be virgin forest, was once heavily exploited. The forest was reestablished by Schenck (Bonesteel, 2015). Pisgah National Forest is now a national park, the beauty of which can be seen in the film, *The Hunger Games*, by Gary Ross (Roadtrippers, 2012). A museum and historic site are located within the park at the location of the former school (History, 2012). The natural beauty of the mountains and the association of them with both human health and healthy forestry have historically drawn people to western North Carolina. The area now has multiple national parks and state parks and, as Professor Brad Daniel of Montreat College notes, the area is known as the "seed bed" for the east coast because of its biological diversity (*MSEE Program at Montreat*, n.d.). As such, it is an advantageous location for learning about ecology and environmental studies.

## **Environmental Education at Montreat**

In 1897, "The beauty and tranquility of the Blue Ridge Mountains led Congregationalist minister John C. Collins to form the Mountain Retreat Association 'for the encouragement of Christian work and living through Christian convention, public worship, missionary work, schools, and libraries' " (History, n.d., para. 2 ). In 1916, Montreat College was founded on the property owned by the organization, which later came to be incorporated as the town of Montreat. In 2001, a second main campus was added to Montreat College in the nearby town of Black Mountain. Over the past



100 years, Montreat College has grown to six campuses with almost 1000 students. There are 15 undergraduate programs, serving both traditional students and mature students, as well as five graduate programs and three online programs (History, n.d.). According to the president, Dr. Paul Maurer, Montreat College's educational approach has three prongs: intellectual inquiry, spiritual formation, and preparation for calling and career (*Meet Montreat Video*, n.d.).

Montreat College has both a denominational statement and an environmental statement. The denominational statement concerns the college's relationship with the Presbyterian Church and acceptance of students from all religious backgrounds. The environmental statement reads:

*MONTREAT COLLEGE IS COMMITTED TO ENSURING A SAFE AND ENVIRONMENTALLY HEALTHY COMMUNITY FOR OUR STUDENTS, STAFF, VISITORS, FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATION TO LIVE, LEARN, WORK, PLAY AND IMPROVE THE ENVIRONMENT WHERE ALL OF THIS TAKES PLACE. "ROOTED IN THE BELIEF THAT WE HAVE A BIBLICAL MANDATE TO CARE FOR CREATION, WE ARE STRIVING TO MODEL AND PROMOTE WISE MANAGEMENT AND STEWARDSHIP OUT OF RESPECT FOR THE CREATOR." THE COLLEGE BELIEVES IN COMPLIANCE ON ALL LEVELS. COMPLIANCE WITH FEDERAL AND STATE LAW AND EPA POLICY AND GUIDANCE AND THE SCRIPTURAL COMMAND TO CARE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT ARE KEY TO OUR EFFORTS AND ARE LED BY OUR PRESIDENT (Fast Facts, n. d.).*

This shows the commitment of the university to Christian stewardship of the Earth, particularly for the environment in which it is located.

According to Professor Dottie Shuman, director of Montreat College's graduate program in environmental education, Montreat was one of the first programs to receive accreditation (personal correspondence, 2015). Montreat

College offers undergraduate majors in environmental studies and outdoor education and a graduate degree in environmental education. As Montreat is Christian college, spirituality is an important dimension of the program. Classes usually begin with a moment of prayer, and undergraduate students take courses on the Old Testament, New Testament, and faith and learning. Undergraduates must also meet general education requirements in writing, math, and computer skills (General Education Core, n.d.).

In the environmental studies program, students study ecology, biology, chemistry, geography, research methods, and statistics, as well as the Christian and general education coursework described above. Students also participate in a 26-day tour of 20 national parks, which is offered every two years. The location of the campus exposes students to a biologically diverse area, and students are able to experience the even greater biological diversity of the continental US on this trip (Environmental Studies, n.d.).

In the outdoor education program, students “learn outdoor skills, leadership training, and environmental studies, [and] students learn to teach adventure activities, team building, and environmental awareness in the context of an outdoor setting and from a biblical worldview” (Outdoor Education, n.d.). The Christian and general education coursework is similar to the environmental studies program as are some of the core courses, such as biology and ecology. Students are also able to participate in immersion courses during which they spend a semester away from campus studying adventure skills in an outdoor setting (Outdoor Education, n.d.). While the environmental studies program requires more science and seminar courses, the outdoor education program includes coursework on outdoor living skills, leadership, psychology, and teaching methodology.

In the graduate program, students design an environmental education

program for any location in the US. Course work includes earth systems, ecosystems, science, environmental history and philosophy, communication, teaching methodology, curriculum design, and research (Master's Degree in Environmental Education, n.d.). Only the graduate program is certified by the NAAEE, as this is specifically focused on environmental education rather than the more general subject of environmental studies or the more specific subject of outdoor education. There are no designated classes on Christianity for graduate students. However, the program does incorporate spirituality into the approach to environmental education. According to Dr. Brad Daniel, Professor of Outdoor Education and Environmental Studies, "A lot of environmental education programs have much to do with the environment and the human-nature relationship, but we go one step further here in talking about how spirituality, and a faith dimension, also plays a role in perceptions of a human-nature environment. I think that makes us relatively unique" (*Meet our MSEE students, professors, and alumni*, n.d.). One way in which spirituality is brought into the classroom is through prayer. According to Tomas Randolph, MSEE student, "We usually have some sort of a devotion before class and I really like to have that time [to] bring a larger perspective into it as well" (*Meet our MSEE students, professors, and alumni*, n.d.).

For environmental studies majors, the campus setting is an advantage due to the "proximity to four major wilderness areas, several national and state forests, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Mt. Mitchell State Park, Grandfather Mountain Biosphere Preserve, and numerous unique and diverse ecosystems" (Environmental Studies (ES), n.d., p. 2). Furthermore, Dr. Brian Joyce, professor of biology and environmental studies, said, "I think that the environmental studies major is certainly one of the strongest majors here at Montreat. One of the primary reasons for that is just our geographic location. We're in the heart of the ecologically diverse southern

Appalachians, the Blue Ridge Mountains, and we literally have right in our backyard hundreds of thousands of acres of wilderness, of forest land. We have our own mountain stream ecosystem that runs right through the property” (*Environmental Studies-Montreat College*, n.d.).

For outdoor education majors, Montreat College has the advantage of being situated “within two hours of numerous climbing spots, four major wilderness areas, and several rivers with whitewater rated up to Class V [and] within a 14-mile hike or bike ride of Mt. Mitchell, the highest peak east of the Mississippi River” (Outdoor Education (OE), n.d., p.2). There are numerous opportunities to learn adventure skills without participating in the optional off-campus immersion programs, though the programs do offer the chance to explore different ecosystems and learn other skill sets.

The multiple wilderness areas, forests, parks, and ecosystems that surround and include Montreat College’s Black Mountain campus offer graduate students in the environmental education program many opportunities to meet the criteria of the six themes set out in the NAAEE certification requirements.

## **Sustainability Practices**

In September 2015, *Sierra* magazine released its ranking of “America’s Greenest Universities: the Top 10 ” (Andrews, 2015). According to the methodology section of the report, the purpose of the ranking is to look at sustainability practices on four-year college and university campuses. Participation is voluntary and self-reported, and the questionnaires are assessed by the Sierra Club, the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education, the Sustainable Endowments Institute, and the Princeton Review (“Methodology,” 2015, para. 1 - 3). “Measurements

of energy usage, greenhouse gas emissions, and other factors are taken from performance years of 2014 or earlier” and are used to assess “environmental achievements and goals, with priority given to achievements” (“Methodology,” 2015, para. 4 - 5). The purpose of the survey is “to act as a guide for prospective students who seek a way to compare colleges based on the schools' commitment to environmentalism. It also serves to spur competition, raise eco-standards on campus, and publicly reward the institutions that work hard to protect the planet” (“Methodology,” 2015, para. 8).

The United States has more than 2000 university and colleges (“Methodology,” 2015, para. 7). Only 153 of these completed the surveys for *Sierra* (“Methodology,” 2015, para. 2). Montreat College was not among those. Of the four institutions certified by the NAAEE, only the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point was ranked in the top 100—it was 65<sup>th</sup> in *Sierra* magazine’s list of “cool schools” (Full Ranking, n.d.). Eastern Kentucky University and NOVA Southeastern University were also not ranked in *Sierra* magazine’s list. However, as participation in *Sierra*’s survey is voluntary, these three institutions may have chosen not to complete the online surveys. Therefore, while Montreat’s Christian statement indicates dedication to an environmentally healthy community and compliance with laws and EPA policy and the environmental education program meets the criteria of the NAAEE certification process, it is unknown to what extent Montreat practices sustainability in its energy choices, building materials, investments, and other ‘measurable achievements’ considered in *Sierra*’s survey.

## Conclusion

Participation in the NAAEE certification process is voluntary and

specific to environmental education. Consequently, many universities may not be aware of it or may not feel it is necessary or appropriate for their programs. In addition, as *Sierra* magazine's survey is also voluntary, many universities may choose not to undertake completing the online survey. Therefore, it is difficult to assess the strength of Montreat College in comparison to other colleges and universities offering environmental education programs in western North Carolina, let alone the rest of the United States. However, it is clear that Montreat College, with its environmental statement as part of the institutional philosophy and its successful pursuit of certification from the NAAEE, fosters and promotes Christian stewardship of the earth. Montreat College's setting in western North Carolina is clearly an asset to the environmental studies, outdoor education, and environmental education programs and provides an opportunity for students to experience the connection between man and nature – and the presence of God – directly.

Is Christianity compatible with ecology? Yes, it is. White may have been correct that Christianity has led to environmental degradation. However, Pope Francis's *Encyclical* signifies a shift away from an anthropocentric Christian view of dominance over the Earth towards a gentler, more sustainable attitude of stewardship. Some Christian colleges are now actively encouraging this stewardship, as can be seen in the environmental education program at Montreat College and the ecological features at Ferris University. We are moving into an age where, instead of mankind ruling over the Earth and its creatures, we now recognize our place in the natural world and are working to save it.

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