

## First Impressions

Stafford Creek Correctional Center in Washington state participates in the Sustainability in Prisons Project. Here, an inmate takes a break from mowing prison lawns with a push reel mower. Photo by Benjamin Drummond. See page 12.





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# Interpreting in Prisons

## The Sustainability in Prisons Project

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In July 2010, I found myself at the gates of Stafford Creek Corrections Center, turning over my identification in return for a badge. Prison staff escorted me through a series of gates, which I heard dramatically slam behind me. After another series of checkpoints, we arrived in a multipurpose room, where we hastily moved tables and chairs, set up a projector, and tested a microphone. In prior work I'd spoken to large audiences and never needed a microphone—but my audiences had never been quite this

large, and never quite this inquisitive. I nervously worried that the subject wasn't "real" or "tangible" enough and that I'd insult the audience by attempting to transport them far from the walls that confined them. Some of these inmates had been in prison for years; could they relate to the bears and wildness of Katmai National Park and Preserve? For the next 90 minutes I would offer the same evening program I'd offered for two seasons as a seasonal ranger at Katmai, but with a stronger dose of conservation biology, and "hard"



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conservation goals while reducing the environmental, economic, and human costs of prisons.

While working to further conservation, SPP asks us to ask questions about ourselves. As citizens, scientists, and interpreters, how do we view prisons and prisoners? What are the conceptions and misconceptions we hold of these places and people? How do we interpret the role of prisons in our society? How does a prisoner view the prison they occupy? How does a prisoner view their relationship with society and their ability to contribute? What impact might science education and connection with the natural world have on incarcerated individuals? How do we view ourselves, as scientists, in society?

More than 1.5 million people are in prison in the United States. In many states, recidivism, or the likelihood of an inmate recommitting a felony within three years of release, hovers at 70 percent, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. However, whether we have family members who are survivors of violent crime, or we simply find it easier to not think about, inmates experience a very different daily life than the rest of us. The prison gates serve not just as physical, but also metaphorical barriers between prisoners and society. Some states work to engage inmates in education and drug treatment programs proven to reduce recidivism, while other states struggle to keep up with the tides of incarceration.

Central to SPP's work is breaking down our known definitions of education, conservation, and interpretation.

Interpretation's forefather Freeman Tilden said, "Interpretation is a communication *process* designed to *reveal meanings and relationships* of our natural (and cultural) heritage to the *public* through *firsthand experience* with *objects, artifacts, and landscapes*" [emphasis added]. As interpreters and scientists we strive to engage audiences in this type of learning, an objective that is

well-aligned with the need to offer incarcerated individuals positive programs that serve to inspire connection with community and good stewardship of our natural and cultural resources.

### Process

SPP acknowledges the interpretive process by aiming to engage inmates with multiple opportunities over a period of time. Monthly lectures are offered at four correctional facilities, presented by a variety of speakers. The program is a partnership between The Evergreen State College and the Washington Department of Corrections that actively engages the academic and conservation community to bring scientists and sustainability experts into prisons. With SPP, interpretation is a process for both the audience and interpreter/scientist. The program engages scientists in a medium and activity that may be unfamiliar—presenting



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Stafford Creek Correctional Center inmates tend to a garden whose vegetables are incorporated into meals.

science. For 90 minutes I would feed off some of the most engaged and ingenious questions I'd heard in my career, and forget about the uniforms worn by the prisoners, or what may have brought them to prison.

In Washington state, the Sustainability in Prisons Project (SPP) is challenging our assumptions of prisons, prisoners, prison staffs, scientists, and conservation biology. This innovative project brings together prisons, academics, and conservation partners to leverage financial and human resources to further

to the non-scientific audience in a prison—while also providing a new experience and understanding of the prison environment (typically presenters are also offered a tour of the facility and conservation projects).

### To the Public

Fundamental to developing an interpretive program is defining your audience. As much as we emphasize the inmates, the “audience” of the Sustainability in Prisons program is broad and multifaceted. The project staff itself is an audience, interacting with varied stakeholders and developing unique perspectives on prisons, conservation, and education. It is the graduate and undergraduate students who serve as the ambassadors of the program, spending time in the prisons engaging inmates in conservation projects and writing papers and theses on the science involved. It is the scientists who come and give talks, and find the experience as eye opening for them as it was for the inmates. It is the prison staff members to escort project staff and facilitate conservation projects, sit in on lectures, and develop their own strategies for reducing resource consumption and waste in the prisons. The media have helped share the project far beyond the prison walls, by telling the community about positive contributions inmates are making and the education occurring in prisons. The staff is careful to constantly ask who the audience is, what the intention is, and what the possible ripples are.



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At Stafford Creek Corrections Center, inmates sort garbage, diverting compost and recyclables.

### Reveal Meanings and Relationships

A few everyday scenes with the Sustainability in Prisons Project:

- An inmate delicately transfers butterfly larvae to a food source plant.
- An inmate sprinkles native plant seeds that will be used for habitat restoration projects.

- An inmate collects data including temperature and water quality to ensure continued growth of frogs in their care.

SPP engages inmates in monthly lecture series, occasional workshops, and conservation projects—working with endangered and threatened species including native prairie plants, Oregon spotted frogs, and Taylor’s checkerspot butterflies. For months at



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At the Stafford Creek Corrections Center greenhouse, inmates tend to native prairie plants that are transplanted into habitat at Joint Base Lewis-McChord.

a time, inmates work day in and day out, paying diligent and continuous attention to living entities. Some inmates comment that their time working on conservation projects represents the first time they have felt compelled or responsible to care for another thing. The seedling, frog, or butterfly pupae an inmate cares for comes to represent their linkage to the outside world, their opportunity to contribute. For some inmates, these linkages become parallel to other areas and relationships in their lives, including their friends and families.

### Firsthand Experience

Many who agree to present talks for SPP worry that their presentations may not be relatable enough to an inmate. Is it rude to enter a prison and talk to them about people and places far beyond the walls? Can they relate to or understand talks about phenomena occurring far away? SPP has found that inmates will indeed engage in these subjects, and often find

parallels, analogies, and metaphors that do relate to their daily encounters in prison. Climate change can be seen in the weather patterns of the areas prisons are located. With an increasing number of these inmates working with SPP and/or prison jobs in gardens and landscaping, they can relate to the soil, moisture, plants, and the food cycle. Inmates had and will have lives outside of the prison. According to the Washington Department of Corrections, 96 percent of inmates in Washington state may be released from prison. And when they return to society, they will make decisions to purchase goods, participate in society, and be community members. We can acknowledge their past experience, and what their experience in the future may be.

The 21st-century environment challenges us to broaden our base and be relevant to our audiences. This relevance is the subject of countless meetings, conferences, and

brainstorming sessions. Efforts like the Sustainability in Prisons project remind us that creativity can build bridges, leverage resources, and magnify results. How can we, as interpreters, emulate SPP and more broadly define our audiences in our parks, museums, and zoos? How can we creatively leverage community groups, organizations, and institutions to embrace conservation, education, and the environment as unified purposes, rather than separate special interests?

Although fundamentally a conservation program engaging scientists, inmates, and others in education and active conservation projects, the Sustainability in Prisons Project reaches beyond definitions and asks all of us—citizens, scientists, interpreters, inmates—to consider our roles, our capacity to have an impact, and the assumptions and stereotypes we may carry.

### For More Information

Bureau of Justice Statistics.  
<http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov>

Sustainability in Prisons Project.  
[www.sustainableprisons.org](http://www.sustainableprisons.org).

Washington Department of Corrections. Quarterly Fact Card, March 31, 2012. [http://www.doc.wa.gov/aboutdoc/docs/msFactCard\\_005.pdf](http://www.doc.wa.gov/aboutdoc/docs/msFactCard_005.pdf)

*Amy Stasch was interim manager of the Sustainability in Prisons Project from March to July 2010. She now holds a permanent position with the National Park Service. Kelli Bush is the current manager of the Sustainability in Prisons Project. Carri LeRoy is co-director of the Sustainability in Prisons Project and Faculty at The Evergreen State College. Nalini Nadkarni is senior advisor to the Sustainability in Prisons Project, and the director for the Center for Science & Math Education at the University of Utah. Dan Pacholke is co-director of the Sustainability in Prisons Project, and deputy director of prisons for the Washington Department of Corrections.*