Environmental Studies Program Graduates As Leaders in Regional Environmental Nonprofits: What Sustains Them and What Influence Did Their Education Have on Them As Committed Environmental Professionals?

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ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES PROGRAM GRADUATES AS LEADERS IN REGIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL NONPROFITS: WHAT SUSTAINS THEM AND WHAT INFLUENCE DID THEIR EDUCATION HAVE ON THEM AS COMMITTED ENVIRONMENTAL PROFESSIONALS?

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by

Kelly Rossiter

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The Faculty of the Graduate College

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education Specializing in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

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Accepted by the Faculty of the Graduate College, The University of Vermont, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education, specializing in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies.

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study investigates the stories of ten committed, regional environmental non-profit (ENP) professionals who were environmental studies program (ESP) undergraduates, exploring what sustains them in their work, with a focus on the role their undergraduate academic and extracurricular experiences play in supporting their commitment.

Financial hardships, public valuation of environmental work, the need to perform multiple roles within the organization, complexities in ecological practice, the associated complexities in human interactions, and a slow timeline for change were the major challenges reported by the participants in their work with regional ENPs. Despite challenges, they persist in their work, often feeling called to the work and prompted by a desire for ethical accord between their personal values and professional lives. Participants describe their academic programs as helping them understand the nature and scale of the environmental challenges. Study abroad, field research, internships, and community-based class projects were all mentioned as academic experiences that allowed them to explore their identities as environmentalists and develop inter and intrapersonal skills. Involvement in student clubs and organizations also provided opportunities for identity development and inter and intrapersonal skill building. Outdoor experiences provided participants with opportunities to develop a sense of place, influencing their future decisions about where to live and work.

Recommendations for ESPs, drawn from the research, include that funding for study abroad programs and field research should be made available to ensure all can access these experiences. Also recommended is having academic courses with a range of levels of activism, coupled with a range of class and club offerings on campus, which allows students to choose their level of engagement. Given attachments to place formed during the undergraduate years, and the subsequent desire for graduates to remain in those places, organizations interested in strengthening the environmental movement in particular regions could do so by increasing the strength of ESP offerings in those regions. In addition, once in the job, continued learning was vital in sustaining participants in their work; greater awareness of, and access to professional development is needed. Mentoring offers another avenue for supporting on-going learning.

These regional ENP professionals are success stories, having persisted – even thrived – in a difficult profession. Despite the difficulties, they maintain generally positive personal and professional outlooks. Understanding their stories provides data about what can be done to help sustain the existing leadership and improve the preparation of the future regional ENP leadership.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

True education is a communal endeavor, and there has been quite a community of people supporting me along the way in this learning: I would like first and foremost thank my lovely Alice, who has been right there alongside me, caring for and supporting me in so many ways throughout the whole journey—I love you. I also am very appreciative of the support of my family, whose interest in my studies spurred me along the way, and for my friends who kept me sane along the way by providing for climb times and other so necessary re-creations and conversations. My advisor, Jill Tarule, has been an immense support. During every step along the way she was there with emotional aid, clarifying questions, and precision editing; her willingness to give of her time and energy is inspiring. I am also very appreciative of my committee members, Ricardo Johnson, Stephanie Kaza, and Bud Meyers, for sharing their precious time and energy resources as well. Building up to the dissertation, there were many courses along the way—I thank all those professors who were willing to make the long drive out to the Northeast Kingdom to share with us, as well as the professors of my on-campus courses. Judith Aiken and the many others involved in lighting the lamp of doctoral learning in the Northeast Kingdom deserve big thanks as well, which of course includes my NEK cohort—it has been a pleasure to share the learning journey with you and I’m heartened to know of the dedication you have for our schools’ students. And thanks to those “critical friends” from inside and outside the cohort who helped me with my thinking along the way. Finally, there are my participants: Most did not know me when they agreed to share their thoughts and feelings with me, but they felt strongly enough about the topic to do so. In
the course of interviewing, transcribing, coding, and writing your words I feel I have come to know each of you better and my gratitude has increased correspondingly. I am heartened to know you are out sharing your work with our world. It may sound a bit prescribed or hackneyed to end an acknowledgements piece with a thanks to all of those people I didn’t mention directly already—I hope that doesn’t detract from the sincere appreciation that I truly wish to share with “all the beings known and unknown” who have walked with me along this learning trail.

Four years ago I began my doctoral studies. I’d heard plenty of grim tales about how the process can sometimes be for people. I entered with a desire to learn and grow along the way. I hoped to ultimately finish, but—much more than that—my goal was to enjoy the process. Though there have been some rocks and puddles in the path, by and large I can say that, with the help of so many supportive people along the way I have accomplished that goal—to all of you, I am deeply grateful.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Parks Daloz, Keen, Keen, & Daloz Parks’ 1996 book *Common fire: Leading lives of commitment in a complex world* served as the spark for this study. In that book, the authors explore the lives of over one-hundred volunteers and professionals “committed to the common good.” Powerful stories of struggle and courage emerge as these individuals describe the external and internal challenges involved in their work and how they sustain themselves in the face of those challenges. I began to wonder what those stories would sound like if they were told by people specifically involved in environmental work.

Daloz et al.’s book contains a passing reference to Thornton (1993) who in “a study of angry and burned-out environmentalists found that most felt abandoned by others and ‘everyone described a deep sense of loneliness’” (p. 208). Despite the challenges and despite the incidences of burn-out, many people are able to sustain their commitment to environmental work (Schmuck & Sheldon, 2001), and for some this passion becomes their profession (Berry & Gordon, 1993; Snow, 1992a; Thomashow, 1995). Melding passion and profession, this work becomes more than just a way to make money, it becomes a way toward personally meaningful activity that advances the common good (Damon, et al., 2003; Malikow, 2007). Such work is often referred to as a vocation (Parks Daloz, 1996; Thomas, 1993) or a calling (Malikow, 2007; Rehm, 1990).

Those interested in environmental work answer the call in a variety of ways. The overwhelming majority finds work in the for-profit or governmental sectors; the remaining few go to work for environmental nonprofits (ENPs). Though only a small
percentage (2%) of the entire nonprofit sector, ENPs wield a relatively potent political influence and position in the public eye (Snow, 1992a). ENPs also present professional challenges unique from those in for-profit and governmental environmental sectors. Tilt (1993) sums up these challenges in his fictitious advertisement for people willing to commit to such a calling:

Welcome to a career where the career path is meandering and often without signposts. Welcome to a profession where positions are few, the hours are long, and salaries are a pittance compared to positions in other fields. On the other hand, welcome to a career that allows mixing career with vocation…Working to forge a balance between the environment and human needs is a challenging and demanding job. (p. xi)

Some do answer the call to this profession, seeking to entwine work with spiritual purpose (Foster, 1993) and identity (Thomashow, 1995). A particular few choose the distinct challenge of working with smaller (and often regional) organizations. These organizations are characterized by an unstable fund base, incessant fundraising, and reliance upon volunteer staff. Add to that the fact that increased professional responsibility often produces decreased contact with the very same environment that spurred the individual to pursue this work, and suddenly the individual finds themselves in an extremely challenging workplace (Foster, 1993; Snow, 1992a).

For those drawn toward the ENP calling, college environmental programs provide a primary avenue of entry (Snow, 1992a; Berry & Gordon, 1993). A wide variety of environmental programs can be found in higher education, with the majority being
focused on environmental science and environmental studies (Romero & Silveri, 2006). These programs play a formative role in producing environmental professionals (Crowfoot, 1992; Foster, 1993; Hall, Tietenberg, & Pfirmann, 2005; Snow, 1992a). This study focuses on that role.

Specifically, this study explores the ways in which undergraduate environmental program (ESP) graduates sustain themselves in their work with regional ENPs and focuses particularly on understanding the role that their undergraduate academic and extracurricular experiences have played in helping them to develop into sustainable ENP professionals. In doing so, this study sheds light on ways that ESP can build their capacity to produce the graduates so needed in the vitally important and particularly difficult world of professional work in small ENPs.

Purpose of this Study

This study uses the stories of regional environmental nonprofit environmental (ENP) professionals with undergraduate majors in environmental programs (ESPs) to understand the impact that these educational experiences have had in sustaining them in their work.

Research Questions

1. What do undergraduate environmental studies program (ESP) majors define as the critical components that help them to sustain themselves in their professional work in regional environmental nonprofits (ENPs)?

2. Are there academic educational experiences that undergraduate environmental studies program (ESP) majors describe as important in
developing the components they define as critical in successfully sustaining their work in regional environmental nonprofits (ENPs)? If so, which?

3. Are there extracurricular undergraduate educational experiences that environmental studies program (ESP) majors describe as important in developing the components they define as critical in successfully sustaining their work in regional environmental nonprofits (ENPs)? If so, which?

Contributions of this Research

A large body of research has focused on the role of environmental experiences and educational interventions in developing environmental sensitivities, attitudes, and behaviors (e.g., Chawla, 1998a; Winter & Koger, 2004; Zelezny, 1999) but I found no research or literature that specifically explores the role of undergraduate ESP in the preparation of ENP professionals. Exploring this topic will illuminate four important research areas detailed below, and will provide information valuable in strengthening the curriculum of undergraduate ESP.

Kovan & Dirkx (2003) point out that there is a general lack of research about professionals in the nonprofit sector, describing the existing literature as “fragmented and poorly defined” (p. 100), particularly when considering paid staff. As such, “we know little about their experiences as activists and even less about ways to help support and strengthen individuals who choose nonprofit careers” (p. 100). Nepstad (2004) underscores this claim, noting that while there is a sizeable amount of research focused on how people become involved in social movements, few studies investigate how to maintain commitment once involved. Focusing on environmental nonprofit
professionals, Snow (1992, p. 37) writes that these individuals are of particular importance because “organizations with paid staff are relatively stable and permanent, unlike many volunteer associations,” and this stability empowers them exert influence over an extended period. He goes on to say “longevity counts…Deliberate efforts to develop and nurture conservation leaders should aim for the long term” (p. 37). Using the voices of my participants and the experiences and insights they share, this study provides valuable information about how to do so.

A second area in which this study yields insights involves the transition from adolescence into adult commitment. Parks’ (1986) The Critical Years attests to the important role that higher education plays in that transition. Damon, Menon, & Bronk (2003) note that when emerging adults are unable to find a purpose, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to do so as time progresses. That being so, these researchers ask “What kinds of noble purposes are today’s educational institutions advancing?” (p. 127), writing that research that sheds light on this question will provide direction for practice in the field of youth development. This study involves participants with at least five years of professional experience in ENPs. While these participants vary in age from about 28-40 years, they all went to college after the mid-80s, shedding light on Damon, et al.’s (2003) question as well as addressing Maldonado, Efinger, & Lacey’s (2003) appeal for study of moral leaders who “were not part of the 60s and 70s paradigm shift (p. 33)” characterized by social upheaval and restructuring.

Commitment within environmental vocations is another area this study illuminates. Researchers have examined the lives of people with a passion or a sense of
vocation (e.g., Colby & Damon, 1992; Parks Daloz, et al., 1996; Rehm, 1990; Maldonado, et al., 2003) but, as yet, “very little is known about how passion, vocation, and commitment are sustained within the lives of those who work for the common good” (Kovan & Dirkx, 2003, p. 101). This combination of passion, vocation, and commitment often holds spiritual connotations (Rehm, 1990), and there is a lack of research describing “how spirituality is actually expressed in the life and work of committed environmentalists” (McDonald, 2002, p. 268).

Understanding the experiences of the person a policy is trying to affect is essential to developing better policies. Lewis & Maruna (1999) write that if we investigate “how individuals understand their own lives, we will be in a better position to explain why, when, and how various policies will be effective with different populations” (p. 231). Insofar as a curriculum can be considered a policy, these authors suggest the primary outcome and importance of this research: providing information that can improve the capacity of ESP curricula to produce professionals capable of sustained commitment in the ENP sector.
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

In the previous chapter, I suggested that there are challenges particular to working in environmental vocations. This section will review the previous literature on the topics of challenges to environmental work, environmental work as a vocation, challenges particular to working in small environmental nonprofits, and undergraduate environmental programs that prepare people for this work. In this section, I also suggest gaps that exist in the current literature and present the contributions that my study provides to advance the understanding of how undergraduate environmental programs (ESP) prepare professionals for sustainable careers in the environmental nonprofit (ENP) organizational world.

The Challenges of Environmental Work

The challenges of environmental work come in many different forms, rooted in the complexity and scale of the task at hand (Roush, 1992a; Thomas, 1993) and the nature of both the work and the lifestyle surrounding it (Foster; 1993; Horton, 2007; Thomashow, 1995). For some, the scale of the task at hand creates a feeling of helplessness or hopelessness (DeBoer, 1997; Kovan & Dirkx, 2003). Macy (1995) suggests that this is particularly so in our society, where we are discouraged from taking action against things over which we do not have total control. For those who do take action, the size of the undertaking seems to demand constant attention, which some give at the peril of their own health (Eigner, 2001; Kovan & Dirkx, 2003; Sohr, 2001; Thomashow, 1995; Tilt, 1993). Tilt (1993) writes, “Working to forge a balance between
the environment and human needs is a challenging and demanding job” (p. xi). Snow (1992a) is more extreme, stating, “In some quarters, one’s net worth to the movement is measured by how close one veers to emotional and physical collapse on the job” (p. 190).

The setting for environmental work is often highly contentious and, hence, emotionally draining. Additionally, the complexity of environmental challenges means that successes seldom come quickly (Berry & Gordon, 1993), are typically ambiguous (Roush, 1992a; Thomashow, 1995), and often involve concessions and difficult political dynamics (de Boer, 1997). Given this challenging setting, Whelan (2000) suggests that it would be valuable to have training and support networks in place; however, he notes that many of those engaged in environmental work “appear to consider themselves ‘tough enough’ to get by without support networks to sustain their activism” (A Toolbox for Environmental Campaigners, para. 3).

Deep engagement in environmental work holds cultural challenges as well (Roush, 1992a). Horton (2007) claims that, “Environmentalism is an embodied politics because personal lifestyle reflects political preferences” (p. 130). Thomashow (1995) explains this link between personal choices and the wider world in explaining that “Whether I choose to toast a bagel, or eat out at McDonald’s, or collect wild berries in the forest, my actions are much more complex than they initially appear…Through the lens of ecological and political identity work, one can interpret the deeper meaning of breakfast” (p. 136). These kinds of considerations and concerns, and associated activities, create multifaceted and omnipresent challenges for environmentally-minded
people operating within mainstream culture (Horton, 2006; Macy, 1995; Thomashow, 1995).

In his study of “green activists” Horton (2006) depicts a less materially-focused culture and cites Inglehart’s (1977) comment that “To have a post-materialist worldview means that one is apt to be out of harmony with the type of society in which one lives” (p. 365). White (1995) suggests that this peripheral status is their own doing; a result of social privilege, environmentalists see nature only as a playground, ignoring the fact that for many people extracting nature’s resources is essential to their livelihood. Thomashow’s (1995) explorations suggest that because environmentalists see property as a common good, they are often “viewed as intellectual elitists who think they can tell other people what is best for them” (p. 79). Thornton’s (DeBoer, 1997) investigation into the lives of 100 leading environmentalists suggests that a kind of “righteous anger” (p. 14) fuels their work, grounded in a feeling of difference with society and the ills it is inflicting on the world. Others depict environmentalists’ separation from the mainstream in a more positive light. The relatively less materialistic orientation of environmentalists (Horton, 2006) allows them to focus on more intrinsically satisfying goals (Schmuck & Sheldon, 2001a; Horton, 2006). Additionally, though novitiates “must enter and negotiate an initially strange cultural world” (Horton, 2006, p. 133), once schooled in its ways, this cultural affiliation can be a source of considerable reassurance and support.

Based on the research and writing cited above, it is clear that environmental work does not come without peril. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that choosing a path of deep engagement in environmental work is still a relatively rare phenomenon (Horton,
2006; Sohr, 2001). Nonetheless, some do follow that path, choosing either volunteer activist work (e.g., Eigner, 2001) or combining their “passion with a paycheck” through professional engagement in environmental work (e.g., Tilt, 1993). In the section below, I will explore the attributes of work that combines personal meaning with a liveable wage.

Environmental Work as a Vocation

Thomashow (1995) suggests that “most aspiring environmentalists perceive themselves as choosing more than a profession, they are searching to link their ecological worldview to their personal identity” (p. 6). Those who sense this interconnection develop a commitment to their activities that goes beyond that often associated with a “work world.” Instead of a life that rotates around a paycheck or the satisfaction of personal needs, they extend and enact their commitment through action toward the common good (Damon, et al., 2003; Malikow, 2007; Orr, 1994; Parks Daloz, et al., 1996; Rehm, 1990; Scott, 1992). Kovan & Dirkx (2003, p. 100) describe this kind of “deep interconnection between the meaningfulness of our lives and the meaningfulness of the work we do” as a vocation. Thomas (1993) defines vocation according to two criteria: “It is work the person most needs to do, and work the world needs to have done” (p. 40). Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz (1997, p. 21) classify work into three occupational categories: 1) jobs—which focus on monetary reward, 2) careers—which focus on progressive increases in position, and 3) callings—which focus on the intrinsic benefits of socially important work.

“Calling” is a term associated with vocation, and it is a term that carries spiritual connotations (Malikow, 2007; Rehm, 1990). Orr (1994) writes that “a calling comes out
of an inner conversation‖ (p. 22). Rehm (1990) explains that history sees vocation as “a spiritual calling to manifest personal gifts and to contribute to the common good” (p. 114). She goes on to state that manifesting this sense of vocation is difficult in the modern world; nonetheless, it is something that appears to be present in the world of nonprofit work. Studying the lives of nonprofit executives, Wilensky & Hansen (2001) revealed that the participants saw the balance between work and personal needs permeated with spiritual purpose. Investigating the spiritual lives of eighteen environmental workers, McDonald (2002) found that many believed they received guidance from a divine spirit, and that they felt “their environmental work is the making of spirit” (p. 267). Thomashow (1995) reiterates this idea in writing that environmental work “is radical in that it challenges the way people view the world, presenting a moral and even spiritual approach that has significant ramifications for how people live their lives and conduct their affairs” (p. 5).

In summary, the literature suggests that environmental work may involve unique challenges and those that take on those challenges may do so with a particularly strong sense of passion and drive. Understanding the “call” to professional work in the environmental world is important in understanding the participants in this study. This call can be answered via work in the for-profit, governmental, and nonprofit sectors (Snow, 1992a). Environmental non profits (ENPs) are a small but important part of the environmental landscape and work in these organizations hold challenges distinct from those in the for-profit and governmental sectors (Snow, 1992a). In the section that follows, I will examine research and writing about working in the ENP sector.
The Challenges Particular to Working in Environmental Nonprofits (ENPs)

Professional environmental work takes place in the three primary spheres of for-profit businesses, governmental agencies, and nonprofit organizations. Those who have chosen to work in the latter of these three spheres have taken the road much less traveled. Snow’s (1992) Conservation Fund investigation into environmental movement included hundreds of environmental organization’s CEOs, staff leaders, and volunteers, as well as academics from programs training environmental professionals. His findings serve as a primary source of ENP information in the discussion that follows. When viewed proportionately, ENPs comprise only a very small (2%) part of the NPO sector—but what they lack in market share they make up in terms of their political and public influence (Snow, 1992a). Describing the workforce characteristics of the ENP sector, Snow typifies the average environmental leader as a 45 year-old white male (79% male) with a bachelor’s degree (99%) and possibly a graduate degree (49%). He has been with his organization about seven years and in his current position for five. This organization typically has about 3,500 members. As compared to his for-profit and governmental counterparts, his position is lower paying and more instable.

Nonprofit work in general can be challenging. Wilensky & Hansen (2001) point out that nonprofit organizations (NPOs) have missions and goals that focus on “fulfilling often imprecise and challenging human issues” (p. 224), often creating accountability issues. They also point out the challenges of making long-range plans in organizations that include volunteer staffing and are subject to the vagaries of grant funding and

---

1 Given that Snow (1992a) expresses sensitivity toward the need for greater racial diversification in the environmental movement, it is interesting that his survey does not appear to have investigated respondents’ cultural and ethnic backgrounds.
contributions. Foster (1993) argues that although environmental leadership is a sector of NPOs still in its infancy, it should be viewed as a “distinct category” (p. 21). He and others characterize ENP leadership as a distinct category based on several factors, including:

1) The extended timeline required for addressing environmental issues (Gordon & Berry, 1993; Thomas, 1993).

2) The scale of complexity involved in ecological systems (Gordon & Berry, 1993; Roush, 1992a; Thomas, 1993).

3) The need to bring together a wide base of technical knowledge and a diversity of skills (Foster 1993; Gordon & Berry, 1993; Thomas, 1993). Snow (1992a) asserts “There is virtually no one in government service, for-profit business, or education in natural resources who must possess as many different skills and use them all effectively” (p. 165).

4) A loose and often ill-defined organizational structure where roles are unclear, such that the leaders must bring together a wide base of managerial knowledge and a diversity of skills (Foster, 1993; Thomas, 1993; Whelan, 2000).

5) Whereas many NPO causes such as public health and social support receive broad acceptance, environmental issues do not (Foster, 1993; Gordon & Berry, 1993).

6) Even within the environmental movement there are often conflicting viewpoints and priorities (Roush, 1992a). Dating back to the feuds between John Muir and Gifford Pinchot, there has been “conflict and multiplicity of opinion” among its
members, leading Snow (1992a) to comment that environmental leaders share a “green world marbled with gray” (p. 139)

Considering these challenges, it may not be surprising that only a small (6%) of ESP graduates choose careers in the ENP sector (Snow, 1992a).

A particular few choose the distinct challenge of working with smaller (and often regional) organizations. While all ENP work holds challenges, working with smaller, regional ENPs holds specific and unique challenges. Snow (1992a) describes these groups as usually having paid staff and budgets under $1 million. On the positive side, he describes these organizations as having board members representative of their grass-roots membership and mixing amateur, grass-roots conservationists, and professional activists into a potent force for conservation. Snow (1992a) writes, “Year after year, they have proven that volunteers, working closely with a small coterie of professional staff, can craft extremely sophisticated and effective public policies without entering into any ‘cult of expertise’” (p. 27). On the other hand, these organizations—and the people within them—must deal with an insecure fund base (and the ensuing need for fundraising), a reliance upon volunteer staff, and the fact that increasing responsibility equates to decreasing contact with the very same environment that spurred their interest in the field (Roush, 1992b). All of these aspects create an extremely challenging workplace (Foster, 1993; Roush, 1992b; Snow, 1992a; Tilt, 1993).

In summary, the literature indicates that environmental work has emerged as a distinct professional field and that ENP leadership occupies a unique niche within that field, a niche with distinct personal and professional challenges. While Snow’s (1992)
survey of environmental professionals, volunteers, and academics has documented the challenges of this work, and while contributors to Berry & Gordon’s (1993) *Environmental Leadership* and Snow’s (1992b) *Voices from the Environmental Movement* have explored these challenges, little is known about how undergraduate ESP experiences may help to shape ENP professionals’ capacities to withstand these challenges.

*Academic Preparation for the Challenges of Environmental Work*

Environmental programs emerged and gained popularity on higher education’s campuses during the early 70s. While these programs saw a slowdown in growth during the 80s, their prevalence has been increasing since then (Corcoran & Tchen, 1999; Crowfoot, 1993; Thomashow, 1995), and there are indications that environmental programs (ESPs) are growing in stature within their institutions (Hall, et al., 2005; Romero & Silveri, 2006). Since the turn of the millennium, Romero and various colleagues have been tracking the status of ESPs in the United State’s colleges and universities. Their survey of 1060 programs or departments at 578 institutions of higher education provides a comprehensive and continuing portrayal of the ESP landscape and inhabitants (Romero & Silveri, 2006).

There are over 1000 colleges with programs directed toward producing majors skilled in varieties of environmental work, and these programs continue to increase in number and stature in higher education (Romero & Silveri, 2006). In their study of ten ESPs at liberal arts colleges, Hall, Tietenberg, and Pfirman (2005) found the programs to be “vibrant” (p. 1), with high degrees of student interest and engagement. And while
there are a spectrum of different approaches, and potentially even a “lack of unifying principles and clarity of what environmental studies programs should be” (Romero & Silveri, 2006, p. 2), some generalities about ESP can be stated. The names “Environmental Science” and “Environmental Studies” are the most common (48% of programs), but the remaining 52% reflect the “broad diversity of names given to many programs” (e.g., Environmental Law, Health, and Education) (Romero & Silveri, 2006, p. 8). Behind the choice of names for a program lies the question of program orientations. Romero & Silveri (2006, p. 9) state that there are “three areas of knowledge” covered in ESPs: natural sciences, social sciences, and the humanities. Traditionally, faculty members in these departments have come from biological backgrounds. Not surprisingly, this has produced ecology-oriented curricula, but in recent years social sciences and other fields have crept in (Crowfoot, 1993; Scully, 2004; Thomashow, 1995). Nonetheless, most ESPs still concentrate their studies in the natural sciences (36%) or balance the natural and social sciences (19%); only 7% concentrate their studies in the social sciences, and far fewer (0.5%) share a social science and humanities focus (Romero & Silveri, 2006).

The dispersal of ESPs across the country is not at all even, with concentrations being particularly high on the eastern seaboard and 33% of all the programs being located in the northeastern United States alone. One state (Idaho) has no ESPs, others have only a few (e.g., North Dakota, Wyoming), and others have an abundance (e.g., New York, Pennsylvania). The state of Vermont comes in on the top in terms of the highest number
of environmental programs per capita (30 programs per million inhabitants)—almost two times more than any other state (Romero & Silveri, 2006).

While the advent and growth of ESPs is generally viewed as a positive development among those in environmental spheres (e.g., Berry & Gordon, 1993; Hall et al., 1995; Romero, 2002; Snow, 1992a), many of these same people have pointed out areas of concern in ESP curricula. The need for increased institutional support for program infrastructure and faculty teaching and research are cited by Hall et al. (1995) and Romero (2002). Increasing student and faculty diversity is one important area of concern (Enderle, 2007; Crowfoot, 1993; Hall et al., 1995; Jordan & Snow, 1992; Romero, 2002), a factor pointed out in Tilt’s (1993) characterization of ENP leadership as “an obdurate white-male island in the middle of the work force increasingly populated by women and people of color” (xxxiii). Another area of concern is the debate over the exact nature of what ESP programs should be. While the interdisciplinary nature of ESP causes “some uncertainty about Environmental Studies (ES) as an academic field and about how to design environmental programs for institutions of higher education” (Romero & Silveri, 2006, p. 2), these authors and others (Corcoran & Tchen, 1999; North American Association for Environmental Education, 2004; Hall et al., 2005) suggest that the interdisciplinary nature of ESP is a strength that should only be expanded. As previously noted, 36% of ESP focus on the natural sciences. A mix of natural and social sciences is seen in 19% of ESP; however, only 4% combine the three areas of natural sciences, social sciences, and the humanities (Romero & Silveri, 2006). While those select few programs that include social sciences may incorporate leadership and personal
development into that curriculum, these statistics point to the two primary elements of concern most relevant to my research: the apparent lack of both leadership and personal development curricula in ESP.

Within the environmental fields there still exists the antiquated notion (see Bass, 1990) that great leaders are born, not made, and that those who achieve prominence are somehow blessed with the skill innately (Gordon & Berry, 1993; Whelan, 2000). Gordon & Berry (1993) firmly refutes that notion, stating, “Leadership can be learned [and] overt preparation for leadership should be an integral part of professional education and experience” (p. 6). This idea is supported by others. Reporting on the Conservation Society’s study of over 500 environmental leaders, volunteer, and academics, Foster (1993) explains “prospective professionals would profit from receiving as much training in the human dimension as in the technical and scientific aspects of natural resources” (p. 25). Thomashow (1995) cites research (Borden, 1986) suggesting that those with a high degree of ecological concern exhibit high degrees of leadership potential. With this in mind, some feel that ESP curricula would do well to more intentionally include leadership development opportunities (e.g., Berry & Gordon, 1992; Snow, 1993).

A range of ideas for integrating leadership development into the curriculum have been presented. Greater engagement in the community is promoted by some authors as a means for developing environmental leadership skills (Berry & Gordon, 1993; Corcoran & Tchen, 1999; Snow, 1992a; Wright, 2000). Orr (1992) urges greater union between higher education’s curriculum and both the biotic and human communities, and envisions a leadership composed of “people whose loyalties are rooted in a place but extend to the
planet” (p. 79). Crowfoot (1993) calls for a curriculum that integrates in “community activities, particularly those that challenge the person and assist her or him in developing social confidence, in gaining organizational experience, and in leading activities” (p. 244). Other authors suggest that internships play a valuable role in ESP student development (Corcoran & Tchen, 1999; Wright, 2000), and Romero and Silveri (2006) report that about one-third of ESPs require them. Alluding to both community engagement and internships, Hall et al.’s (2005) investigation into ESPs found that students were, “often requesting more ‘practical’ knowledge in ES [environmental studies] issues and problem-solving experience” (p. 5). One final area of importance mentioned in the literature is mentoring. Describing his own propulsion into environmental leadership, Tilt (1993) writes, “Many factors played a role in this career choice including education, mentors, persistence, and luck. Of this list, I would say that mentors and luck played the biggest role” (p. xi); Hall, et al. (2005) and Whelan (2000) similarly emphasize the role of mentoring in developing leadership capacities.

Several authors suggest that effective leadership involves complimenting the interpersonal skills noted above with intrapersonal skills as well (Crowfoot, 1993; Snow, 1992a; Whelan, 2000). Crowfoot (1993) builds the link between leadership and intrapersonal skills in asserting, “One of the most important individual characteristics for achieving successful leadership is this: knowing your limitations, failures, and weaknesses as well as your potential, successes, and strengths and then using this information in working with others to achieve common goals” (p. 245). Other authors underscore the importance of intra-personal skills development. Thomashow (1995)
stresses that environmental workers must have “the ability and willingness to look deeply within themselves, to understand their motivations and aspirations, to clearly articulate their environmental values, and know how to apply them to professional and personal decisions” (p. xvi). Activist-author James Whelan’s (2000) experiences with activists reveals that what he terms the “heart” aspects of environmental work have been overlooked; he has found that training in these dimensions is “highly valued” and results in “identifiable improvements” (p. 7). Macy (1995) promotes the importance of inner exploration as a means to understand and counteract prevailing societal messages discouraging environmental political action. Orr (1992) highlights the need for ESP’s interdisciplinary learning to include intra-personal exploration in asking, “Why is it so hard to talk about love, the most powerful of human emotions, in relation to science, the most powerful and far-reaching of human activities?” and he suggests that the ensuing discussion “might even be a good place to discuss emotions in relation to intellect and how best to join the two, because they are joined in one way or another” (p. 44). Crowfoot (1993) recommends that love and attention be focused inward, writing that, “Compassion for self means caring for esteemed aspects of oneself, unattractive parts of oneself, as well as dimly perceived parts of oneself” (p. 231). Thomashow (1995) and Thornton (DeBoer, 1997) suggest contemplative practices as effective avenues for building this capacity for self-care.

Having developed and spread quite rapidly over the last forty years, ESPs are well-established and vibrant components of today’s higher educational landscape, as a variety of reports attest. Romero & Silveri’s (2006) longitudinal descriptive study of ESP
indicates they are growing in numbers and Hall et al.’s (2005) study of ten liberal arts colleges with environmental programs indicate they may be growing in stature; findings corroborated by Corcoran & Tchen’s (1999) and Snow’s (1992) surveys of faculty at these institutions. All of these studies are limited in that they only provide descriptive snapshots of what these programs looked like at the time of study—as such, little is still known about how these programs affect their students’ performances in the post-baccalaureate world. Snow (1992a) counsels that efforts must be made to prepare ENP professionals for the long-haul and several authors (e.g., de Boer, 1997; Macy, 1995; Snow, 1992b; Thomashow, 1995; Whelan, 2000) have both pointed to the challenges of sustaining oneself in environmental work and provided some ideas for curriculum to address those challenges. And while research exists investigating the impact of environmental studies coursework on college students’ values (e.g., McMillan, Wright, & Beazley, 2004), there appears to be no research that specifically focuses on ESP program graduates’ perceptions of their baccalaureate training and its influence on their longevity in the environmental sector. The research outlined below will be an effort to explore precisely those perceptions, among professionals working in regional ENPs.
CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Understanding Phenomena Through Investigating Lives

The universe is made up of stories, not of atoms.

--Muriel Rukeyser (2006)

Meaning does not exist by itself; we create it. A tree may flourish apart from us, but the meaning of that tree does not. Whether we see it as a source of shade, a complex biological system, inspiration for a poem, or as a provider of match sticks, depends in large measure on who we are.

--Parks Daloz et al. (1996, p. 107)

Each individual’s life contains a vast collection of stories. Still, we select certain stories for the telling. Stories are both souvenirs and passports; the stories we tell illuminate our past, filter our present, and chart our future. At each stage of the way, they are powerful, becoming our own personal mythology, defining what is important in our inner-universe, motivating our actions in the wider world, and serving as reminders of who we are and who we aspire to be (see Chawla, 1998b; Doll, 1993; Palmer, Suggate, Bajd, & Tsaliki, 1998; Seidman, 1998 for example).

This study examines the stories of environmental studies program (ESP) program graduates who have demonstrated sustained commitment in their professional work with environmental nonprofits (ENPs). Coming to understand who these participants are necessarily involves understanding their stories, as experienced in the present (Lewis & Maruna, 1999; Seidman, 1998; Wilensky & Hansen, 2001). Capturing the nuances,
varied meanings and complexity of these stories necessitates a qualitative approach. Maxwell (1996) explains that qualitative approaches are effective in “understanding the meaning, for participants in the study, of the events, situations, and actions, they are involved with” (p. 17) and “understanding the process by which events and actions take place” (p. 19). Specifically addressing the value of stories in environmental education research, Chawla (1998b) writes:

The most important strength of research about significant life experiences is that it is qualitative, within a wider tradition of environmental education research which is predominantly quantitative. Thus it is equipped to explore the emotional and interpretive side of environmental experience that research has otherwise avoided, but which forms a necessary complement to a full understanding of not only what people do, but why. (p. 384)

Using qualitative methods to collect the stories that a number of individuals provide in explaining their commitment, and then searching for common threads among them, themes can emerge that illustrate complex human phenomenon in a way that more quantitative methods cannot (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996; Glesne, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schram, 2003).

Each qualitative research approach involves a particular way of defining, depicting, and deconstructing the human-social experience (Schram, 2003); my research approach is phenomenological. Gall, Borg, & Gall (1996, p. 603) explain that “phenomenological researchers…are interested in studying how reality appears to people, rather than the objective nature of reality.” Phenomenological researchers focus on small
groups of participants, exploring those participants’ experiences of particular events, in order to distill the understanding and meaning they find in those events (Schram, 2003). My study is based on the phenomenological assumptions that participants’ lives must be understood in terms of the events and relationships within those lives and that through dialogue and reflection with a number of participants it will be possible to convey the “essence” or “central underlying meaning” of a phenomenon (Schram, 2003, p. 71).

Whether described in terms of “stories” (Wilensky & Hansen, 2001), “assisted autobiographies” (Colby & Damon, 1992), or “significant life experiences” (Palmer, et al., 1998; Daniel, 1997) the phenomenological tradition is useful in research that examines a “particular form of consciousness, how people achieve it, and its implications for our common life” (Parks Daloz, et al., 1996, p. 243). My research uses a phenomenological lens to explore participants’ understanding and meaning of their undergraduate ESP experiences and the way in which they perceive those experiences to have developed their capacities for sustained professional work in the ENP sector.

**Sample**

Horton (2006), Parks Daloz (1996), Eigner (2001), and Sohr (2001) all advocate that we are wiser to look for the solutions to our problems by studying solutions than by studying problems. This qualitative, phenomenological study is based on this approach. My study focuses on the experiences of ENP professionals who 1) have earned a baccalaureate degree in an ESP major, 2) have shown commitment to their vocation as professionals with regional ENPs, as evidenced by five or more years of professional work in that sector, and 3) describe themselves as strongly committed to their work.
Evidence of community or professional recognition (e.g., complimentary media attention and awards from community and professional associations and organizations) was considered as an additional, although not required, criterion in determining the final sample for study.

Having evidenced the ability to persist in the regional ENP sector, these people’s stories may illuminate the way for others entering that area and wishing to stay in it. Looked at individually and as a group, there certainly were some impressive accomplishments and demonstrations of talent. One man was recognized by his state’s major newspaper as a “Forty Under Forty”—a person under the age of forty whose accomplishments were already substantial; his town also recognized him as a “ Citizen of the Year.” The “Governor’s Teamwork Award” was awarded to another. One maintained an active research agenda and published often in refereed journals and trade publications. Several had been selected to participate in competitive professional development programs such as the Rockwood Leadership Program, Midwest Academy, and the Environmental Leadership Program. And the group as a whole demonstrated an impressive array of leadership accomplishments through their volunteer work, including one who co-founded a very active “localvore” movement, another who founded a committee to aid her alma mater in setting up a socially responsible endowment fund, and several who served on their local conservation commission or assisted with other area environmental organizations. Their college careers held similarly noteworthy accomplishments. One was a member of Phi Beta Kappa, another received the “Outstanding Graduating Senior Award In Environmental Studies,” and two graduated
cum laude. While in college, one served as the student body president, another led her school's large outdoor club, and several were asked to serve as teacher's assistants and tutors within their departments. This range of individual accomplishments evidences that the sample as a whole was characterized not only by the ability to persist in the regional ENP sector, but to thrive in it as well.

This study draws on Romero & Silveri (2006) in defining ESPs. Those authors note that there are “competing proposals” (p. 2) regarding how ESPs are configured; in some schools they operate as independent departments or as a distinct program within a department, with the department or program having faculty specifically assigned to that area. In other schools, ESPs are created using the facilities and faculty of select departments on campus. Recognizing the existence and legitimacy of the two approaches, this study includes participants from both types of ESPs. Romero & Silveri (2006) also note the different orientations that programs can have. Some (37%) are focused on natural sciences, others (19%) blend natural and social sciences, and a small (7%) set focus on social sciences. This study includes participants from each of these types of ESP programs.

Regional organizations are defined as organizations which are not connected to a larger national or international organizations (e.g., a Nature Conservancy field office would not be considered a regional organization, while the Maine Coast Heritage Trust would) which focus on influencing activities within a politically defined area of the country (e.g., the Midwest, the Northeast, etc) and/or an ecologically defined area (e.g., the Colorado River drainage). As is the case with any attempt to create rigid boundaries,
reality transcends them. In the course of recruiting participants, I found instances of people working at organizations such as an independent agency that was heavily dependent on state funding, or a state agency that was wholly dependent upon its own fundraising, and an agency that operated much like a traditional ENP but was housed within a university. In the literature review I discussed some of the challenges often found in regional ENP work. In selecting participants for this study I focused on those aspects in determining each potential participant’s suitability for the study. All of the participants in this study operate in small ENP organizations, using Snow’s (1992) criteria adjusted for inflation. In his work, he defined small ENPs as those having a budget of under $1 million; accounting for inflation, this currently equates to a budget of approximately $1.75 million. Typically, a budget in that range supports an organization with approximately twelve or less full-time staff.

In gathering this group of exceptional ESP graduates who are now personally and professionally successful in their work with ENPs, I used a purposive “critical case” sampling procedure (Patton, 1980, p. 103), which collects a group of participants based on their fit with the criteria described above. I had intended to gather this group via two avenues, snowball sampling and a field search; however, snowball sampling proved to be an ineffective technique for locating the unique blend of attributes sought in participants for this research. Snowball sampling involves “first identifying [those] with relevant characteristics…these subjects are then asked for the names of other people who possess the same attributes as they do” (Parks Daloz et al., 1996, p. 33), and is a method that has been utilized in several studies exploring lives of sustained commitment to a common
good (e.g., Kovan & Dirkx, 2003; Maldonado, et al., 2003; Parks Daloz, et al., 1996; Wilensky & Hansen, 2001). Snow (1992) reports that only a scarce 6% of undergraduate ESP majors went on to work in the nonprofit sector; though I found no statistics regarding how many go on to work in regional ENP organizations, on an experiential level I learned that it is slim indeed. Therefore, a field search became my primary recruitment mechanism.

I conducted a field search with four different prongs. First, I contacted six organizations conducting continuing education and professional support for those engaged in environmental work. I received positive replies from three of these organizations, the Environmental Leadership Program, Green Corps, and the Center for Whole Communities. They emailed a recruitment letter (see Appendix B) to their program alums, netting one participant. Second, I contacted the alumni offices and/or faculty leadership of nineteen college and university ESPs (including twelve HBCUs), netting a positive reply from two institutions and 4 program alums. Third, I sought to distribute my recruitment inquiry via twelve professional networking groups that organize environmental professionals according to various demographics (e.g., Young Conservation Professionals Network, Asian Pacific Environmental Network, and Indigenous Environmental Network); this netted no participants. Fourth, I used the WiserEarth (www.wiserearth.org) database to create a list of organizations to contact directly. WiserEarth is an open-source online database which catalogs environmental organizations around the globe. In the words of its developer, Paul Hawken (2007), it is “the most complete listing of issues that need to be addressed to achieve a just and
sustainable world. It is a curriculum and course catalog for a university that should but
does not exist” (p. 192). Using the advanced search feature on that site, I conducted a
search of Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine, using a keyword of “environmental”
and limiting the search parameter to regional organizations. From there I visited the
listed organizations’ websites to confirm that each organization’s mission appeared to
focus on environmentally-related issue and that they had full-time staff, and to determine
the appropriate staff contact. In total, I contacted seventy-eight organizations, asking
them to distribute a recruitment inquiry (see Appendix A) to their staff. Four participants
were gleaned via this route, bringing my total participant pool to ten. By the time I
accumulated my participant pool, I had heard from several people who had received my
recruitment materials by more than one channel (e.g., from both their university and an
organizational listserv), indicating to me that this combination of techniques cast an
effective net over the northeastern region’s participant pool. Because I then had a
complete participant pool, that obviated the need to cast my inquiry further afield. Key
demographic information about my ten participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME (Pseudonyms)</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Current Position</th>
<th>Approx years in ENPs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Susan Doyen</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Biology w/Env Studies concentration</td>
<td>Land conservation</td>
<td>Program Manager</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1: Participant profiles (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Major and Concentration</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Henry Dwight</td>
<td>BS</td>
<td>Environmental and Resource Studies, Biology (double major)</td>
<td>Wildlife protection</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nora Mortinson</td>
<td>BS</td>
<td>Environmental Science</td>
<td>Watershed protection</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrie Olafson</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Anthropology, Environmental Studies (concentration)</td>
<td>Environmental education</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seth Parks</td>
<td>BS</td>
<td>Environmental Studies</td>
<td>Land conservation &amp; education</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy Richardson</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Environmental Studies &amp; Eastern European Languages (double major)</td>
<td>Environmental education &amp; research center</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casey Rogers</td>
<td>BS</td>
<td>Environmental Studies</td>
<td>Political action</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle Tompkin</td>
<td>BS</td>
<td>Environmental Science</td>
<td>Watershed protection</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jared Troyer</td>
<td>BS</td>
<td>Environmental Studies</td>
<td>Education center</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tara Winters</td>
<td>BS</td>
<td>Environmental Science &amp; Biology (double major)</td>
<td>Land conservation &amp; education</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My efforts to generate a diverse participant pool underscored much of what the existing literature says about professional environmental work in our country (Crowfoot, 1993; Hall et al., 1995; Romero, 2002). Hawken (2007) writes that “From the beginning, conservation was an idea firmly rooted in upperclass, white society” (p. 45) and though the “obdurate white male island” referred to by Tilt (1993, p.xxxiii) well over a decade ago happily appears to be increasingly populated by women, the hue sadly appears to
remain largely the same. Realizing that the northeast’s demographics did not lend themselves to creating a diverse participant pool, I searched further afield.

First, I searched on both the United Negro College Fund (www.uncf.org) and Thurgood Marshall Fund (www.thurgoodmarshallfund.org) websites. The United Negro College Fund offers a search engine that locates colleges by discipline, and lists “Environmental Science(s)” among the choices, but that yields no results. The Thurgood Marshall Fund website offers a search engine that locates colleges by discipline as well. A total of 173 various disciplines are listed, including such specialized areas as “Middle/Near Eastern and Semitic Languages” and “Apparel and Textiles”; but “Environmental Studies” or “Environmental Sciences” were not among them. Using a variety of search terms on the Google website (www.google.com), I located a variety of people and organizations affiliated with historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and minority institutions (MI), as well as several HBCU/MI ESP, which I contacted via email, sending follow-ups when my initial inquiries yielded no replies. Several of the people I contacted aided me in locating additional organizations and moving this aspect of recruitment forward; however, in the end, to my knowledge only the Indian Environmental Professionals’ Network (www.envindia.com) and its affiliated website, the Green College Network, distributed my inquiry to their memberships, and only Spelman College forwarded my inquiry to those alumnae it felt might assist me. In the end, these combined efforts unfortunately netted no participants of diversity.

The mission statement of the University of Michigan’s Multicultural Environmental Leadership Development Initiative (MELDI) states that “Though the
number of minorities in the population has been rising steadily, relatively few minorities are hired in a professional capacity in the environmental field” (MELDI, 2009)—research cited by Bonta & Jordan (2007), and my own challenges in recruiting participants of diversity, bear this out. While I was disappointed with the yield of all of my efforts in building diverse representation into my participant pool, I was very impressed by the vibrancy of organizations representing issues of importance to minority communities. In my field log I recorded some of my feelings about the investigation and discovery, writing:

I was and am amazed. And the issues they are addressing point to the power and the strength of the diversity in the movement characterized by Hawken in “Blessed Unrest”. Organizations like WE-ACT, out of Harlem, bringing light to issues of public health and environmental justice, such as the disproportionate placement of Metro bus garages in poor neighborhoods, where the pollution is less likely to elicit protest. While certainly the environmental movement must do more to bring in the soon-to-be majority…it was truly heartening to see the strength of those in the movement now.

My investigations uncovered professional organizations in environmental work for all of the predominant ethnic groups in America. The Multicultural Environmental Leadership Development Initiative website (www.umich.edu/~meldi/) provided links to a variety of ethnically-aligned environmental groups including the: African American Environmentalist Association, Asian Pacific Environmental Network, Network of Indian Environmental Professionals, National Hispanic Environmental Council, Indigenous
Tribal Network, Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals, and Native Americans and the Environment. Hawken (2007, p. 18) speaks of the “autonomy of diversity” in the environmental movement, suggesting that the strength of this autonomy is that “Groups with varying outlooks and discrete goals cooperate on key issues without subordinating themselves to another group” (p. 18), but in the same breath he also warns that “diversity can also prevent connection, cooperation, and effectiveness” (p. 19). While it is a strength in the movement that it has expanded its focus to include issues as wide as Brazilian rainforests, Beijing emissions, and the placement of Brooklyn metro bus parking lots, and while that inclusiveness of issues has created a commensurate inclusiveness of diversity, there are still long strides to be made until actual parity of representation is reached.

Data Collection

Seeking to understand the sustained commitment of these participants from a phenomenological perspective, my research sought to “bring truth into being through dialogue” (Parks Daloz et al. p. 123). Glesne (2006) notes that “Questions raise consciousness” (p. 99), suggesting that through the process of interview questioning, participants may uncover aspects of themselves of which they were previously unaware. The questioning process took place both via in-person interviews and telephone interviews. I had originally planned on-site interviews with all the study participants, but I did not anticipate having to cast as wide a net as I did in order to glean ten participants. Finances, time constraints, and environmental concerns all came into play in determining whether to do an in-person or telephone interview.
I had prioritized on-site interviews based on my preference for conversation with people in-person rather than over the telephone; however, upon reflecting on and transcribing each interview, I feel that the telephone interviews generally had as smooth and animated a feel as did the in-person interviews. In the end there were four telephone interviews and six in-person interviews. Regardless of the communication channels used, the interview process requires that participants have a safe space to share and explore their feelings (Glesne, 2006). I endeavored to create such a space by asking participants to be in a place of their choosing—office, home, or a neutral space—and at a time in which they feel relaxed and ready to explore the questions in depth (Seidman, 1998). Of the six in-person interviews, four occurred at the participant’s place of work, one occurred at the participant’s home, and one occurred in a neutral space (coffee shop).

Interviews were scheduled for 60 minutes. The list of interview questions was crafted through editing iterations with my advisor and several “critical friends” in my doctoral cohort (see Appendix C for the list of interview questions). The sequence of the interview questions begins (Question #1) with a concrete “grand tour” question (Glesne, 2006, p. 84) that warms them up for the ensuing discussion (Eigner, 2001). The next question (#2) asks the participants to use their own terms and ideas to describe the components important in sustaining them professionally, in keeping with the phenomenological nature of this study (Schram, 2003). Questions #3 and #4 explore the influence that their undergraduate experiences have had on their ability to sustain themselves in their professional work. Question #5 is a probe eliciting significant life experiences that can add richness and realism to the interview data (Chawla, 1998;
Seidman, 1998). The last question provides participants the opportunity to share any information they feel relates to the topic but which was not uncovered through the previous questions, prior to the “fading out of the interview” (Eigner, 2001, p. 189).

While one of the interviews did not go for the full hour, many of the interviews went well over an hour, by those participants’ choosing. Many of them expressed their enjoyment of the space the interview provided for them to relax, recollect, and reflect upon their personal and professional lives as environmentalists—something their often hectic work world does not permit. As our interview wrapped-up, Henry commented:

I haven’t thought about this stuff for a long time, you know, you’re into it and you’re in the, the, in the thought of, you’re in this thought, in this thought of you know the day to day grind, but I don’t think that I’m necessarily that introspective of a person, so this conversation, making you kind of like reflect on the fact has been really cool, has been really fun for me, thank you, I appreciate the opportunity.

Transcribing previous interviews as the interview series progressed allowed me some “in-time” analysis of process and some tweaking to improve it. Following my first interview, in my field log I note “Looking over my transcript and noticing my asking of some closed-ended questions…or seeing how I could phrase a question to allow for more opening.” In future interviews I actually typed a few open-ended prompt starters at the bottom of the list of interview questions, so as to remind myself of this (e.g., “What was that like…?”, “Tell me about…”); subsequent interview transcripts evidenced more open-
ended questioning. A deeper tension for me in the interview process concerned how much to “handle” the process. Reflecting on the first interview I wrote in my field log:

I didn’t want to steer or influence the conversation toward narrowly prescribed ends. The challenge is to balance two understandings: I understand that I am not merely a recording instrument—I understand that as an interviewer I am not inert, I am something more than a disembodied voice asking them to enter in approximations of their best answer to the question at hand. I have certain topic areas that I’d like my participants to explore, but it is their exploration and I don’t want to “over handle” the conversation, to push it in pre-determined directions… I want this inquiry to be open-ended—while I have ideas about what environmental programs need, I haven’t been in the position my participants have as learners and as practitioners, so I want my research to reflect those experiences and what has been learned along the way, versus what I have read and thought about along the way. But this research is focused in certain areas, so how do I shine the light into those areas, how do I generate thought about those areas, without unduly “steering” the process?...How do I negotiate between what they are telling and what I seek to explore? We’re in this together. I can imagine that if quantitative research were driving a car, qualitative would be riding a horse. There’s a lot more interactive energy there, spurring the conversation in particular directions, but understanding in the end that the participants carry it forward in the manner they wish to go.
As this was a tension, rather than a question with a clear answer, I carried that tension throughout the interview process; however, I do feel that in subsequent interviews, by jotting down notes about particular vocabulary or phrases each participant used, I could then frame follow-up probes in a way that directed the conversational light into specific areas while still shining it through each participant’s personal lens (Seidman, 1998). An example of this can be found in my interview with Seth:

Kelly: Well, earlier on you were talking about, a couple of phrases you used in terms of “peace in your heart” and “wise leadership”, those kinds of aspects, uh, where have those ideas developed over time and how are those ideas important to you?

Seth: Umm…well…this leadership stuff, there was a class…

I recorded in-person interviews with both a tape recorder with microphone and a McIntosh Ipod’s Italk electronic recording feature. Telephone interviews were recorded using only the tape recorder. Having the Italk as a back-up proved valuable, as in many cases the tape recording, though easier to transcribe because a foot pedal could be used, did not have as good a sound quality. For interviews that were both tape and electronically recorded, I would transcribe the interview first with tape then listen through the interview on the Ipod to correct and flesh out any portions where sound quality hampered transcription. During all of the interviews I kept a notebook handy, in which I would jot down key phrases, ideas, and language, for purposes of both immediate reference during the interview and for future reference and consideration.
Seeking to build a research relationship that is a “more participative and dialogical undertaking and less the monological activity of the lone field-worker doing research on respondents” (Schwandt, 2003, p. 156), I emailed transcribed interviews back to the appropriate participants with the invitation correct, clarify, or elaborate upon any of the information documented. Though the length of those documents (typically 20-30 pages) may have swayed many participants from reading them thoroughly or at all, I did hear back from several participants, with comments ranging from surprise at how often they said “ah” and “um,” to pithier comments such as a note from one participant about how important they considered volunteer work in building her abilities as an ENP professional (“Something I forgot to mention that has been both challenging and helpful to me is my volunteer work. After graduating, I realized that I needed more experience to get a job and so I took on a couple things as a volunteer…”).

Data Analysis

With each interview running in the 20-30 page range, as the interviews progressed and the data mounted, I realized the value that qualitative software would provide. After investigating several options, I purchased NVivo 8, which proved to be incredibly useful. Once all the interview transcriptions were complete, I began re-reading to familiarize myself with the content and themes that arose (Maxwell, 1996) and I used an “open coding” (Eigner, 2001, p. 190) process, whereby participants' responses were broken down into discrete parts, each related to a component or factor that seems to contribute to sustaining them and their work (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Words, phrases, and ideas that contributed to the meaning of each question in the
research and seemed to “stand on their own as pieces of data” (Maldonado, et al., 2003, p. 13) were parsed out, coded, placed first into categories and subcategories, and stored in files titled according to the themes they represent and with which they correspond (Glesne, 2006). The NVivo 8 program allows for both “free nodes” (categories that stand on their own) and “tree nodes” (categories with related subcategories, called “child nodes,” staged within them); typically a theme would begin as a free node and as I analyzed each specific transcription and the entire transcription body more deeply, some of these free nodes became tree nodes when child node categories beneath each could be identified, or some would become child nodes when their fit within larger tree nodes began to emerge. For example, during the first stage of coding a theme of “emotions” appeared, establishing a tree node; through further analysis several different salient emotional categories, such as burnout, depression, and frustration were created as child nodes. In turn, the child node of “frustration” was parsed out into further child nodes according to the stated source of the frustration, such as “failure” or “slow timeline.” In the final stage of coding, there were nine basic tree nodes, which parsed out into a total of 112 category and sub-category child nodes, and 17 free nodes. With the exception of one theme (“Cresting the curve”), all of the themes I address in Chapters Four and Five were mentioned by three or more participants, indicating that by the end of my interview process saturation had been reached (see Appendix F for an overview of themes addressed by participants).

Throughout this coding process, I strove to keep in mind that what is not observed is often as important as what is (Horton, 2006) and that my own preconceptions may limit
my full openness to the data. I addressed this challenge and ensured credible interpretation of the data through three processes. First I engaged in periodic peer-debriefing sessions that provided external checks on the data analysis process, enlisting two peers who served as a “devil’s advocates” by challenging my assumptions and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Second, during the writing process I shared pieces of material with a “critical friend” who critiqued both the structure and content of the writing. Lastly, I met periodically and communicated regularly via email with a group of other doctoral students who were writing their dissertations, so that we could discuss our research, our ideas around the research, and the writing that resulted.

Combined with the communal efforts detailed above, I also used field logs as a method of “epoche.” Also termed “bracketing” (Schwandt, 2001), Schram (2003) explains that “This refers to the ability to suspend…our judgments and preconceptions about the nature and essence of experiences and events in the everyday world” so as to allow the reality to emerge as lived by its participants; this technique is “an integral part of the phenomenologist’s approach” (p. 71). I constructed these field logs in a dialectic format (Fulwiler, 1991): initial entries were written in the Microsoft Word format, and then while building subsequent entries, I also periodically reviewed existing entries and then reflected and commented upon those entries using the “mark-up” feature. In doing so, throughout the data collection and analysis stages I advanced a dialectic process between my previous and current selves, allowing each to check on, advise, alert, and inform the other (Brown, Mittan, & Roen, 1997; Fulwiler, 1991). Schwandt (2001) points out that the research and writing process presents a hermeneutic circle in which
one’s perceptions both shape and are shaped by the data-text. This circle can be seen in a field log entry following my first interview, where I grapple with the questions of how to mediate between my own understanding of a particular word or concept and how much to direct the interview process toward exploration of that concept, understanding that the concept may, in fact, be more a part of my own assumptions than the participants’ realities:

With my first interviewer, I feel he has so much associated “sustainability” with ecology and the human endeavor within it, that he doesn’t see its application toward the self. As a result, questions posed to him through this lens seemed to be interpreted in terms of “how has your training helped to promote sustainability?” or “how has your training helped to sustain the enterprise you’re a part of?” With my second interviewer, “sustainability” seemed to be interpreted in terms of how her training is helping to propel her forward on a continuing professional trajectory.

In a later “mark-up” I consider the question again, and my response to it as the interviews progressed:

Words have different meaning to different people, so a question’s words can be tailored so that a person understands it. In interview #4 I utilized words like “personal resilience” and “inner resources” more, and I feel the person better understood what I was referring to and could better answer to that. While I need to remain sensitive to steering the conversation, I can direct it. If it were a spectrum, on one end would be “Hello” in the middle would be “How are you?”
and on the other end would be “Describe today in terms of the things that annoy you about it.”

Both recording my present thoughts and then later reflecting upon those thoughts (recorded in that present), I generated a lively conversation across time with myself, my research questions, my participants’ responses, and my subsequent analysis and writing processes, harnessing reflective awareness as a tool for addressing and allaying subjectivities that arose during the process (Schram, 2003).

Limitations of this Study

Because this study includes only ten participants, no claims to generalizability can be made from the resultant data. In addition because this group of participants is comprised of an exceptional population, the data collected should not be interpreted as representative of the experiences of typical undergraduate ESP majors now working in regional ENPs. The range of stories being told here may also be constrained due to the demographics of my participant group.

For starters, all of my participants were in their late twenties to early forties, and much has been written speculating on generational differences within the environmental movement. Pondering generational differences in their book Breakthrough, Nordhaus and Shellenberger (2007) posit that, “Environmental leaders from the generation of ’68 were never forced to grapple with the kinds of existential and philosophical questions pondered by those currently holding the short end of the historical stick” (p. 34) because environmental leaders no longer hold the power they once did. In his memoir In the Thick of It (2005), Michael McCloskey considers his thirty-plus year tenure with the
Sierra Club and comes to a similar conclusion, saying: “This new generation had not lived through the ‘glory years’ of our movement….Success is no longer readily available as our teacher. I realized how lucky I had been to learn in better times” (p. 350). Adam Werbach, who at age twenty-three became president of the Sierra Club during the 1990s, seemed to agree, writing, wrote in his memoir “Unlike previous generations of Americans, Generation X suffers from limited expectations,” (p. 59) because they were not raised in the same state of relative innocence about environmental and other issues that earlier generations enjoyed. These profession-specific generational differences, along with the many other generational differences that this group of late-twenty to early-forty year-olds have experienced in their childhood, adolescence, and years as young adults have likely had impacts on them that are different from those experienced by older generations. Additionally—and perhaps related to their relative youth—most of my participants were not in long-term relationships and had no children. In Chapter Five I discuss this finding in greater detail, but suffice to say here that this demographic aspect likely colors many of their experiences as ENP professionals.

It is also important to note the wide variety of missions, goals, and methods that exist among organizations involved in environmental work (Hawken, 2007). There are a range of activities in which environmental organizations can be involved, running the spectrum from education to policy crafting to street protests. While the range of my participants’ work included such areas as education, policy crafting, and even community organizing, their organizations were not focused on direct action and resistance. It is very possible that the experiences of professionals involved in direct action and resistance
work (e.g., Nepstad, 2004) would have a set of experiences and related thoughts and feelings that would differ markedly from those of my participants.

Another demographic constraint that is addressed in greater detail in Chapters Three and Five concerns that of diversity. All of my participants are of European descent. Jordan and Snow (1992) stated that the lack of racial and cultural diversity in the environmental movement makes the movement “less powerful and less effective in accomplishing its goals,” because many important ideas and concerns go unheard, an idea underscored more recently by Bonta & Jordan (2007). It is very possible that the experiences of racially and culturally diverse ESP undergraduates who have gone on to work in the regional ENP sector have experiences that are radically different from my participants. Their stories could add valuable insight about ways to enrich the environmental movement and the regional ENP sector (Bonta & Jordan, 2007), but because there are no racially or culturally diverse voices expressed in this study, those stories—and the ideas and concerns shared within them—are not told here.

There are several methodological limitations to this study as well. Validity is one issue; people have “idiosyncratic days” (Seidman, 1998, p. 17) and it may be that my interviews with people occurred on one of these kinds of days, affecting their responses—though none of my participants made any indication as such. However, the October to December months during which most of my interviews took place were relatively idiosyncratic in the sense that during those months the shrill of the world’s financial crisis was rising in volume. During that time period many were also launching their yearly organizational fundraising drives, pushing financial concerns even more to
the forefront. These factors could have impacted my participants’ thoughts about personal and organizational finances.

Participants’ desire to appear socially acceptable posed another threat to validity (Seidman, 1998). Termed “taboo motivations” by Parks Daloz et al. (1996), these are “motivating emotions that one is either uncomfortable with or which others regard as suspect—particularly if one aspires to work on behalf of others” (p. 278), such as ambition, pride, or need to please. It is possible that these participants did not know me very well and may have been trying to impress me; however, this did not appear to be the case. Having chosen their own location and time for the interview, participants seemed ready to share their honest views and feelings about the topics we explored. Validity is further challenged by the fact that this is a retrospective study. It is possible that there is a sizeable gap between the past as my participants actually lived it and the past as they remember it and related it to me. Chawla (1998a, 1998b, 1999) has grappled with these concerns, concluding that it is not what actually happened in the past so much as it is what we remember about that past, and how those memories influence our actions today, that has real import. I would concur; however, the fact remains that the participants’ reports of past events may not be completely valid.

There are also limitations to the reliability of this study. Reliability can be enhanced through “interrater checks on coding and categorization procedures and results” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 226), but, with only one researcher, those procedures were not in place. Finally, there is the issue of subjectivity. I come into this research with my own set of experiences. While these experiences can help to inform my research, they bring
with them resulting biases and beliefs that can affect my collection, interpretation, and presentation of the data (Glesne, 2006). I used writing in field logs and discussion with “critical friends” to address some of these subjectivity concerns (Glesne, 2006). Nonetheless, certain subjectivities remain and should be fully disclosed; I provide a more detailed look at those experiences, biases, and beliefs below.

Subjectivity

The process of jury selection theoretically weeds out persons with strong feelings about the case to be tried. The opposite is true in scholarship.

--Nash, 1989, p. xi

I was not an ESP major as an undergraduate and I have not worked for an ENP for any extended period of time. My choice to study ESP graduates who have sustained themselves as professionals in regional ENPs might then seem unusual—but it is not inexplicable. In this piece I hope to suggest some links between the topic and myself. Understanding those links, I can then better understand how to harness the strengths and mitigate the biases those links might contribute to this research (Glesne, 2006; Patton, 1980; Schwandt, 2001).

My undergraduate years stand out as among the most formative periods in my life. These experiences cause me to believe that those years may be similarly powerful for many others. This belief has propelled me to work in the college environment for most of my professional life, in both the student services area and as a faculty member. The time and energy I have invested as a professional in undergraduate education, and the experiences I have gathered along the way, has only increased my belief in the power
of the undergraduate experience. This power may not be felt as equally by my research participants. As the researcher, I will need to be conscious of my enthusiastic bias for the undergraduate experience. Perhaps the undergraduate years for others represent an emotionally distressing period of transition, an experience forced upon them by their parents, a stultifyingly boring hoop to jump through on the way to the “real world”… or something else. I must allow their experiences, and the lessons learned along the way, to emerge undistorted.

My engagement in the environmental world since college also shapes my current views. While I continue to believe strongly in environmental work—whether as a volunteer or a professional—I do hold certain reservations. Sometimes I wonder if environmental work is merely a kind of penance, a way to absolve oneself of the inevitable impact of being alive, and the particular impact of being alive in an affluent society. I also wonder if for some it becomes a way to establish themselves as unique, as different from and better than others—a kind of green fashion. And then, at times I wonder where all this environmental “busy-ness” is going: so much driving here to strategize about this, flying there to learn about that, bussing somewhere else to protest the other thing, so much printing or producing paraphernalia about who did what wrong and how…I wonder at times if maybe we all ought to act on the simple principle that “two wrongs don’t make a right.” In saying all of this, I already have rebuttals, I know these feelings may not sit on solid ground—but they exist. Left unaddressed, their existence has the potential to cloud my research.
Lastly, I have the view that our current approaches to solving environmental problems are focused far too heavily on technological fixes, and not enough on examining the sociological, psychological, and spiritual aspects of environmentalism. I have the view that “technological sustainability” has infiltrated higher education and I have the suspicion that this approach also prevails in higher education’s ESP programs. This suspicion could cloud my clear collection and interpretation of the data, directing me toward conclusions I already “know” exist, but which may not, in fact, be born out in the participants’ experiences or the data they have shared with me.

Researchers are typically drawn to a topic due to some deeply embedded interest in it. That interest can enhance and advance or distort and hinder that research. Maintaining an awareness of my biases and responding with the techniques laid-out in the “Data Analysis” section, I hope to ensure that my subjectivities do not detract from the reliability and validity of this research, but rather that they inform and illuminate it.
CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

Challenges to Regional Environmental Nonprofit (ENP) Work

As I pulled into the Spring Lakes Farm\textsuperscript{2}, I spotted Jared in the woodlot, cajoling and grappling with the Farm’s two oxen, Floyd and Dexter, trying to get the yoke adjusted on one. You would not immediately guess that he was the director of this operation. As soon as he would quiet Floyd enough to begin wrestling with Dexter’s yoke, Dexter would begin heading in the opposite direction...thus began my first interview. As the interviews progressed, the scene proved to be a strikingly fitting metaphor for some of struggles and controlled chaos that often typifies the life of the regional environmental nonprofit (ENP) professional. While each voice expressed itself in its own grammar, together a series of shared stories emerged when I explored the question of personal and professional challenges with my participants. When I asked him to describe some of the successes and challenges he was currently facing, Jared responded, “which one of those do you want to start with?” and suggested that “being successful in the face of challenges” meant that challenges and successes were often paired. Such is certainly the case when considering the first of the challenges, that of multiple roles.

*Multiple Roles: “It’s small enough that everyone does a bit of everything”*  

As the ox-wrestling farm director vignette would suggest, and as the literature suggests (Foster, 1993; Thomas, 1993; Whelan, 2000).), the life of the regional ENP professional demands finesse in moving between a variety of professional roles.

\textsuperscript{2} Participants’ names and other identifying features have been changed to preserve anonymity.
Comparing the experiences of those entering into government and nonprofit environmental work and his own, Jared said:

Many people have very different experiences sort of graduatin’ from ah…a institution and then going into another established institution or goin’ into a place where there is, there is a definitive role and responsibilities and more or less here, we created the roles and responsibilities and they’re evolving as well.3

These organizations are characterized by small budgets and limited staff, creating the need for professionals capable of bridging between the variety of demands running the organization requires (Foster 1993; Gordon & Berry, 1993; Thomas, 1993). Considering the confluence of small budgets and limited staff in reflecting upon her progression through the leadership of the environmental design education center she currently directs, Carrie spoke to the diversity of talents that transition has both demanded and built:

I came as an intern and then have had not quite every job there but [laughing] pretty much I mean I’ve, in the last six and half years, I’ve spent, um, the most of that time doing sort of being a program director of the curriculum, so that was really my focus for the first four years or so that I was there, and then, um, and then more recently have gotten into kind of more of the administration, I mean it’s a small place so it’s like a nonprofit that has right now we have six full time people in the office, we had three when I started, so, um, it’s small enough that

3 Seeking to express the emotion and content of participants’ words as accurately as possible, I have attempted to quote their speech verbatim, leaving in such things as pauses, stalling words (e.g., “ah” or “um”), and repeated phrases. I use the following conventions when presenting the participants’ words: Three ellipses (e.g. “I feel...good about it”) indicate a natural pause in their speech. Four ellipses (e.g., “I went....to the meeting”) indicate that I omitted words. The exception to this is at the beginning or end of a quote, when three ellipses indicate that the quote begins or ends in the middle of a larger statement they had made.
everyone does a bit of everything, but I’ve gotten more into doing some of the, um, finance, and kind of back in, um, uh my previous position to my current one was Director of Operations, so I was doing a lot of the like human resources, personnel management, and insurance, and payroll, bookkeeping stuff [She laughs at the seeming “un-glamorousness” of it]…

This breadth of roles comes with it a host of responsibilities, and inevitably there are areas of the work in which participants felt less skilled. Discussing his own transition from a science-specialized role in the organization into leadership Henry found that

…sometimes management skills can be lacking in environmental organizations and, and I found that at the last organization that I was in and unfortunately I found it in the present organization that I’m in and I say “unfortunately” because I was the manager.

Confronted with a host of responsibilities and little experience in effectively delegating those responsibilities, some try to fill the gap by doing it all themselves. Recounting his ten-year progression from being a petition signature collector into the ranks into the leadership of a state-based environmental and social justice organizing coalition, Casey described a previous executive director who

…took on everything, you know, it was like this organization was, at some level he felt that was him and everything had to go through him and he had to do all the grant writing, he had to do all the major donor fundraising, you know, he had to be the spokesperson at any event, it was just like crazy…
Ultimately, the man “just got burnt-out, trying to do way too much.” Despite these hazards, certainly the diversity of the work can be a plus, providing participants with the inestimable reward of continual learning (a topic addressed later) and filling the day with a diversity of tasks. Amy described how the “fundraising, grant writing, and logistics” demanded in her role as the education director for a regional ENP “kept the work interesting.” This multiplicity of roles also ties into another topic addressed later, that of a holistic view. Michelle characterizes this feeling in explaining “I don’t want to become just focused on invasive species, I really want to…really try and get more of a rounded out understanding of the challenges that we’re facing in the watershed.”

But in balancing the demands of this role diversity, participants expressed that—as the literature suggests (Snow, 1992a)—the first thing to give is time in the field. Working now as the educational programs director at an arboretum, Tara spoke for most of the participants in commenting that “over time my job changed to become less in the field,” as did Henry, who in his progression into the leadership of a wildlife preservation organization found that “as you go along in your career you start spending less and less time in the field and more and more time behind a desk and that’s exactly what’s happened to me as well.” That said, it appears as though the dangers of being drawn wholly away from the field work that they find so satisfying is less of a danger in regional ENP work than the literature suggests exists in the ENP field as a whole. One positive aspect of the multiple roles demanded in regional ENP work is the opportunity to stay at least nominally close to the issues, people, and activities that first drew them into the work. While role specialization tends to occur in large ENP organizations (Snow,
1992), the regional ENP professionals participating in my research had at least a bit of
dirt from the field under their fingernails. As the coordinator for new initiatives at her
conservation organization, Susan spoke directly to the fact that the multiple roles allow
for continuing connection to the community and the land. She said:

The interdisciplinary nature I think is also a really sort of personally satisfying
thing about being in this field…one day I’d be out in the field with a land owner,
um, you know, looking at the biology of their property, the next day I’d be on the
phone to Sacramento trying to how to figure out how we could get coastal
conservancy money, the next day I’d be, you know, strategizing about “How can
we negotiate this five million dollar deal?”…it’s very interdisciplinary.

Michelle’s main role is managing the aquatic invasive plants program in a major
Northeastern watershed, a task that typically involves getting people to “sit around the
table and talk about our fears about this issue and really foster relationships and
partnerships.” While she enjoyed the human dynamic that presents, she relished the
opportunities when she could “jump ship and run over there [an archeological field site]
and help out for an afternoon.” Henry described the “high” community contact provides
him, countering the “administrivia” involved in leading a waterfowl protection
organization:

You can go and you can give a talk to a lake association or something…you’re
not going to get home ‘til eleven, but I feel good, you can gain energy from that,
because you realize “Wow, these people care,” and they come up afterward and
say that’s a great presentation, we learned so much about loons, can I become a
member of your organization, those sorts of things, that’s a high, that can carry you through a few days worth of the budget and things like that, um, when I’m doing things that seem just like administrivia, that’s when you really, you know, that’s when you can go down in the dumps, and because you just kind of think, “Well, I’m here, I’m at the office, it’s eight o’clock, I haven’t got to work on anything that I find remotely interesting all day, I’ve just been doing paperwork and reports” that’s when you start to feel sorry, you know, for yourself.

The regional ENP professionals I interviewed for this research are both challenged and stimulated by the multiple roles their positions demand. With a limited budget and a small staff, the work environment is dynamic and ever-evolving—and it demands a comfort with playing a broad variety of roles. With this variety of roles comes also a range of responsibilities, responsibilities that some of the participants found their educational experiences had left them ill-equipped to fulfill. Working in an organization with a small staff and faced with a variety of tasks that need to be addressed, the challenge for these professionals becomes one of effectively managing staff and delegating responsibilities so as to avoid the perils of trying to do it all themselves. The multiplicity of roles these positions demand has a positive side as well—these professionals also clearly enjoyed the opportunities to engage in field work that their positions allowed or even demanded on an occasional or frequent basis. A more concrete and overridingly negative challenge that almost all participants dealt with was that of personal finances.
Financial Hardship: “If you’re trying to do this as a career, that’s stressful”

It was mid-November. Leaving from outside of Boston, where I had been interviewing another participant the day before, I headed north, encountering some snow flurries along the way. I plunged onward, aiming to be on time for my meeting with Henry at the headquarters of his waterfowl preservation organization in Southern Maine. Along the way I got a call on my cell phone—it was Henry. Due in part to time and largely to finances, he hadn’t yet put studded tires on his car and he was feeling wary about the fifteen mile drive off the interstate to the office. He suggested we meet at the just-off-the-exit Dunkin’ Donuts instead.

As the literature suggests (Snow, 1992a, Tilt, 1993), finances were always the specter hanging in the background of my participants’ lives. Henry cut to the chase in responding to my inquiry about “the challenges you feel you are facing and have faced over time as an environmental nonprofit professional,” saying:

Yeah, yeah, boy it’s, it’s almost a question of where to start and sooner or later we have to hit on the financial aspects, so maybe we’ll just go in there first thing and the story that I find really illuminating is...we like to think that at the same time as we’re accomplishing our mission we are turning out you know the environmentalists or biologists of tomorrow, helping to form these folks, so we want to give them a good experience, and we want to give them, you know, the message that “You’re doin’ the right thing and, you know, you could be a banker, sure make all sorts of money and things, but this is, the world needs more biologists, the world needs more environmentalists, so keep the faith and keep
going and stay with things” and I was really surprised to hear our senior biologist once telling people, “No, don’t do it, you know, leave, leave this field, go and get yourself a good job that’s gonna pay...something...and, and go.”

While he was surprised to hear his senior biologist speak so openly, he did not discount the truth of what was said. Casey, the executive director of a state-wide environmental advocacy organization, said that “probably most of the time the struggle is financial,” a statement most of the other participants lent credence to—eight of the ten participants mentioned financial hardships, for the organization and for themselves, as a challenge faced by regional ENP professionals. Too big to be run wholly by volunteers, yet not so big as to rest on a more diversified and secure funding base, or to assign the fundraising responsibilities to a specifically focused (and trained) department within the organization, regional ENP professionals reside in a financially uncomfortable sort of netherworld, as described by Seth, the executive director of a community farm and land trust:

Maybe if you’re a person that doesn’t have to think about the funding and you just get your, you know, you get a paycheck to do this work, I don’t know, but if you’re, if you’re tryin’ to do this as like a career where you know need to make money in order to dedicate the amount of time, it’s not like you’re just doing this as you know a hobby or you know participate in environmental stuff after work or a couple of weekends a year, something this is what you’re doing for work and getting paid to do it, and I’m sure there’s people that don’t have to worry about the funding, they just get their checks but then someone, someone else in the development department in a bigger organization has to worry about it, but I mean
I think that’s stressful, um, you know knowing that you know that even as an organizer your paycheck is coming from a couple of major donors or this one grant we’re getting as an organization and if that doesn’t happen then you know are you gonna have a job?

My interviewing occurred as the economic downturn increased in severity and also at the point in the year when many of these organizations were underway with their major annual fundraising efforts. The financial ramifications of the situation on their organizations—and hence on them personally—created a palpable level of concern in many of our conversations. Preparing for a meeting the following day, where he planned to “lay it all out” to his staff, Seth explained that “this year actually we’re having the worst financial situation I’ve ever had.” Henry recounted a recent conversation with a board member: “they said, you know, it’s, we’re gonna hurt at the end of this year, but we’ll make it, we’ll be fine, next year is gonna be a different story.” But even when times were better, the situation was hardly secure; discussing her previous work with a natural areas conservation program, Michelle recalled:

…there was always the question of whether my job is still going to be there for the next year, so it was just constantly wondering if there was gonna be funding for the job for the next year, that you know can be really, um, frustrating and you know I would definitely say that that’s another low point and I know that that’s not just that particular position…
Indeed it appears not—discussing the pay that goes along with being a regional ENP professional, Henry said that they “really are undervalued and I, we’ve all known that for a long time.”

*Public Valuation of the Work: “They don’t need to protect the river this year”*

Henry’s comment about being “undervalued” reveals another facet of the financial challenges ENP professionals face: several of the participants equated the financial challenges of the work with a low value assessed by the public, which sapped some of their enthusiasm for the work. Reflecting on how the nation’s current economic situation might affect his organization—and consequently him—he added:

…I think environmental nonprofits more so than say some of the social, you know, child services and things like that and the food pantry and things, I, you know, we’re gonna drop off first, because when it comes right down to it, people are going to be making these judgments, you know, “Hey, kids or trees, kids or wildlife, kids or the environment” and the kids are gonna win.

Nora echoed his sentiments in suggesting “I think this kind of work is the first thing that people are like ‘Oh well…they don’t need to protect the river this year,’” and when discussing the issue Casey said “you can’t help but wonder.” Despite these sentiments, the participants who expressed these ideas also seemed to share Henry’s feelings when he said, “I don’t think I’m bitter about it…it’s just a fact of life and it’s kind of a sacrifice that you need to be willing to make in order to go into this profession.”

*The Public Face: “I’m not nearly as optimistic as I know I need to sound”*

Though these professionals are willing to overlook the public devaluation of their
work, there is another aspect of dealing with the public that causes them deeper pain. Earlier in this paper, I discussed some of the positive and negative challenges associated with the multiple roles often demanded of regional ENP professionals. One additional negative challenge concerns that of the “public face.” Regardless of the position they hold within the organization, working in such small organizations these professionals clearly see themselves as public representatives of the organization and of the environmental movement itself. Given the contentious nature of environmental work (de Boer, 1997), this can pose challenges. In the following passage, Tara explains the difficulties of dealing with people who do not really feel invasive species are a problem they need to address:

It’s actually really hard for me, um, you know I like to say what’s on my mind, and you know, especially when I’m not representing myself, I’m representing an organization that relies on contributions [she laughs] so I need to be a little bit more…have a little bit more tact I guess when I deal with those people, um, it’s frustrating for me because I, I try my hardest to understand where they’re coming from and I, it’s really hard I don’t understand why, you know, they they can’t understand my point, so it’s actually hard for me and so, um, you know I think I do a pretty OK job at it, but I wouldn’t say that it comes easily for me to deal with those kinds of situations….it can be difficult to, you know, really mask what your true feelings are.

While Tara’s comment reveals some of the challenges faced with a contentious public, Seth explains the challenges of dealing with a public that just doesn’t seem to care:
…that’s one of the challenges is everything is going to hell in a hand basket, where do we deploy our effort to teach and to demonstrate in the best way so we are making more of a difference and not just, not just for show, and not just an amusement?

Henry expressed another facet of the “public face,” expressing the tension he feels between trying to project an image of optimistic progress as the public face of his organization, when, on a personal level, he is much less hopeful about the state of the environment. He explains this tension:

I am not nearly as optimistic as I know I need to sound, when I’m talking to donors or staff members or anything else…my personal belief is that things are gonna get really, really bad and that we are looking at the end, essentially, of our way of life….and yet, that message doesn’t go over well with a potential donor, when your, so when I’m writing a Director’s Message or something like that, you need to balance that and, you know, I feel like I need to let people know my thoughts on these things, but always end with a little bit of a positive twist, you know, like “Well if we can, if enough people can learn about these issues and spread it around to their neighbors we can change values and attitudes, and we can, and we will get, you know, come out of this” when deep in my mind I think that’s a possibility but I’m not sure I believe it.

Whether the emotion is experienced in dealing with a public that is contentious, or apathetic, or just does not seem to want to hear the real truth, many of the ENP professionals in this study expressed feeling some challenges in modulating between their
public role as the representative of an organization and their personally held environmental beliefs and values.

**Human and Ecological Complexities**

In their book *Environmental Leadership* (1993), Berry & Gordon suggest that the complexity involved in environmental work poses challenges to professionals in the field. Overall, the participants in this study expressed more positive than negative views toward the aspect of complexity; the difference between Berry & Gordon’s (1993) suggestions and the findings in this study may lie in the question of “What kind of complexity?” In looking over participants’ statements about complexity, I saw two different aspects of complexity emerge. The first kind of complexity was that created by humans—this complexity had both bright and shadow sides in the eyes of participants, though generally the brightness drove out the shadows. The second kind of complexity was that found in the ecosystem. This type of complexity was also not without challenges; however, participants generally found those challenges to be quite stimulating. In the sections below, I will present participants’ views on the human and ecological complexities in turn.

**Human Complexities: “It can become overwhelming”**

The shadow side of the human complexity had mainly to do with bureaucratic hassles and the various hoops that participants felt they needed to jump through in order to unite various intra and inter-organizational parties. Speaking to the latter challenge, Tara noted “it’s always difficult when you’re working with a volunteer board, um, you know people have different opinions and different ideas.” Discussing inter-
organizational challenges, Susan described a recent frustration in her work at a state-level land trust, as she tried to get a local-level trust on-board with a new fundraising program:

The frustration or the issue is we have a local inn-keeper who is very enthusiastic about this program, really rearing to go, really wants to [promote it] to her guests, collect money that would go to the local land trust. The frustration is that the local land trust isn’t necessarily ready, willing, having the capacity, whatever the issue is, there not necessarily ready to jump on board with this “Contribute to Place” program….we don’t want to just sort of jump into that local land trust’s territory, collect um all this money and sort of appropriate it for our own purposes, um, but at the same time we don’t want to let this inn-keeper’s enthusiasm go unharnessed, so the kind of challenges, you know, how do we work both with local land trusts and this business owner to kind of make the whole thing work?

Michelle’s work primarily involves working with state and provincial agencies tasked with watershed oversight, and she expressed encountering similar feelings about the inter-organizational challenges involved:

We’re trying to meld all these things together and really understand OK, you know, red light here, red light there [animatedly pointing at the table as if it identifying “red lights” in an actual proposal], you know, how are we going to deal with a plant if it gets there, because we can’t do these things there and how are we going to deal with a fish here if it gets in because we can’t, you know, use these quarantine issues here so, um, it, it, can become overwhelming.
For Michelle and for the other participants, those feelings of being overwhelmed by the human complexities of the task are also at least matched by the satisfactions involved in engaging in those complexities effectively. She explained:

You just have to become really well-versed in what it seems like three different languages and I’m not talking about French, and the New York and Vermont accent difference, it’s a understanding the internal functionings of these three different bodies and….when you get to the point where you’re all there together and you realize “Oh my goodness, we’ve overcome this huge…clash, you know, just by fostering these relationships and making sure we get the right people in the room and we’re using the correct language and everybody’s you know, vetted the ideas and has said, “OK, we really do need to talk about this, this is an issue” and when that meeting happened I mean, I was on Cloud Nine, it was just like “Yes! We got there, we’re talking about it.”

Seth cast these complexities in a positive light as well, feeling

…excited to put up with the occasional nonsense and chaos of this type of organization that is so uh, wrapped up in this community and you know dealing with town ownership and different town boards and land trust boards and customers and clients, um, I get a kick outta that personally.

And in her work at an environmental design training center, Carrie found the challenge of bringing different groups together to be “really interesting,” saying that:

In some of the work that I do now, you really want to find out what that…person needs or what that group needs…and that’s really important if you’re tryin’ta, to
help someone you really need to be able to figure out what it is exactly that they need and really work with them.

While the human complexities of working within their ENPs may at times elicit the kinds of frustration suggested in the literature, my participants more often expressed feelings of positive challenge and interest in the creativity and craft that facilitating intra and inter organizational harmony involves.

*Ecological Complexities: “I’m intrigued by the complexity of it all”*

A second kind of complexity, that which involves working with and within the ecosystem, was seen by many as a very positive aspect of the work. Nora described it in terms of the “little nuances.” Henry was more expansive in his language; bubbling with excitement as he speculated about a “grand unifying theory” emerging in his organization’s wildfowl research, he expressed “I think that we’re on the verge of some great things, one of the things we’re doing is to try and pull all these disparate threads of research together into a kind of a grand synthesis…. that hinges on almost everything you can imagine.” And indeed the human and ecological complexities intertwine. In her work as the director of a watershed protection organization, Nora experienced this mixture of the two, as seen in this interview exchange:

Nora: Mary has been dealing with the Didymo [in her watershed] for a couple of years now.

Me: Yeah, oh, OK, and you all just recently had an outbreak it sounded like?

Nora: Yeah, well it’s supposedly an invasive species although they’re not really sure what that designation means, but um, there was a bloom in [my watershed] in
July that was found and it was the first time that Didymo was documented in this region, and so, you know, being part of [a shared watershed network], that means it’s also Anne’s problem now, so I called her up “Hey Anne!”

Me: Oh, no! OK, yeah certainly there’s that very, uh, tangible connection in terms of watersheds.

Nora: Right.

Susan explains a similar fusion between the human and ecological complexities at her land trust, asking:

Given our goal as um really controlling large portions of the land base in certain areas, what’s the area of overlap between land conservation and economic opportunity?….How can we make our land protection work more relevant to the communities?

Whether the complexity arises mainly from the human sphere, the ecological sphere, or a union of both, Jared shares the attitudes of these participants in describing “…the overall concept, uh, and so, the concept of it all comin’ together…on some level……ya’ know, I’m intrigued by the complexity of it all…it’s not, not to me at all a boring existence.”

*Slow Timeline: “That’s the thing that can really beat you down”*

This human and ecological complexity of the work does contribute to one unpleasant side effect. Both Gordon & Berry (1993) and Thomas (1993) have pointed to the slow timeline for change as being a primary challenge in ENP work, a claim which my participants’ stories bear out—half of them indicated that the slowness of change was a major source of frustration in their work. I happened to interview Tara the day after her
watershed organization met to vote on a major new initiative. She laughed a bit as she said:

…it’s fresh in my brain, we’ve been working on this plan for this, um, lake association and we’ve been working on it for over a year and like I said, finally at the board meeting last they approved it and it was just like “Finally!” we’d put so much work into it…

With so many different stakeholders involved, each stage in the action process becomes more complicated, and each demands patience. Early on, the challenges often involve gathering consensus among disparate interests, as Michelle related to me:

Whew! It can be overwhelming at times….things just take more time, I think that’s the thing that can really beat you down a little bit is, you know you just feel like, “I’ve been working on this for so, so, so long and we still just can’t quite get there and because there are other things that influence um, buy in from our different groups….I can’t do that without some of the language from the three different jurisdictions and their buy-in and understanding of the process, and it has taken, you know, maybe three times as long as I thought it would take to get to where we are right now and we’re still a long way off, it can become overwhelming.

In his work to unify public and private interests for cleaning up a toxic river site, Casey has been waging a “campaign has been dragging on for ten years” and though “there’s been wins all along” he characterizes it as “an ongoing saga of work.” In his leadership of an environmental education center, Jared saw the challenge as being one of trying to
“build continuity, have, have traction in the community for a variety of projects and ideas, um, having sufficient connections and...uh...knowledge and people with skills and resources that can collaborate....uh...it’s challenging to build that network and you’re constantly tryin’ to...shore it up and improve that network.” Even when consensus is reached, implementation brings its own set of challenges. Jared said it is “a question of really having the patience to some of the programs through, really seeing like a, a development...over time, seeing, getting’ programs started and seein’ the benefits, you know, three to five years down the road.”

Though dealing with the slow timeline for change is a challenge, many of the participants saw it as an understandable and necessary—if not pleasant, aspect of their particular path in environmental work. By and large, the participants in this research saw themselves as community builders and educators rather than activists (a point discussed later in this chapter), and accept that these processes take time. Jared described the span from his farm-based environmental education centers early days to the present as such:

It’s nice to have, have been in a position where, you know, you’re sittin’ in a barn somewhere and you’re dreamin’ up a community building and there’s lots of talk about what could be, should be, and would be, and then ya’ go through with it, ya’ know, ya’ build the thing, or same with the...bringin’ oxen onto the property and gettin’ more involved in forestry....from dreamin’ up these, these concepts to actually implement them, you know, to actually have seen so many through now that’s, that’s the journey that’s sort of the thing that needs to be done, so...I’m good with that.
Before coming into his education-oriented work, Seth was in an activist role, “[You feel] ‘This has to change!’ and you don’t realize that things have been that way for a long time and it’s gonna be hard to change anyway,” in contrast, he said he felt that he was “now in an environmental activist space that’s really slow, I’m talking about educating, that’s like this is the total other end.” He was happy with that change:

I think that’s what I’ve come to rely on is that, that slow change is stronger change, you know, and I and I mean, who knows but hopefully causing something that, the people who got me hooked did it in a slow way, you know, because I can’t even remember it’s like I just came to the farm and absorbed it, it wasn’t you’re gonna have to, it wasn’t like I was forced into anything, I think that’s something I can observe.

Financial challenges, low public valuation of the work, a need to maintain a positive façade in the face of daunting human complexities, and an at times excruciatingly slow pace of change are some of the primary challenges my participants expressed dealing with in their work as regional ENP professionals. Fortunately, these rather stressful challenges are balanced out by stimulating challenges, including a varied work environment and intriguing ecological complexities. Considering the stresses of such work, it is reasonable to wonder why they are in this field and how they got to be in it in the first place, which I will examine in the next section.
Challenges to Entry: “I lucked out”

As noted in the previous section, the regional ENP professionals in this study experienced many challenges in the course of their professional lives. And while they experienced many of these challenges as being positive, growth-inducing opportunities, they recognized them as challenges nonetheless. And it is not as if the challenges only occurred once they reached a particular level of leadership and responsibility within the organization. Indeed, many of the participants felt that the regional ENP world is a tough world just to gain entry into and an even tougher world to progress within. So, despite the challenges presented to them in their current positions, many felt fortunate to be in them nonetheless. Seth believed he “lucked out ‘cause I got the top job and they actually pay a reasonable amount or at least enough for me to, to be fine, um, but I definitely was in a different category for awhile.” Michelle described the gauntlet she ran in gaining entry into her organization as follows:

When I say ‘fought so hard’ I mean when I graduated, um, with my master’s in public administration in 2003, I mean I was pulling five different jobs to try and find that one job that ended up being here and it wasn’t easy, it was really hard, every time you applied for an entry level position there were something like 130 people and you know 30 of them had Ph.D.s! And it’s an entry level position. Are you kidding me?

Amy’s entry into ENP work was rocky as well. She moved to Washington DC and signed a lease, thinking she would get a job in the ENP sector, but quickly had to move
into the for-profit world to pay the rent. She left after a year, because she said she had “never envisioned myself working for a for-profit agency and didn’t want to continue doing so.” Ultimately, she found work with an environmental program she had been involved with in high school.

**Staying In and Moving Ahead: “The career trajectory thing”**

The challenge is not over, even once in a position. Tilt (1993) says the ENP world is one in which “the career path is meandering and often without signposts.” (p. xi). Considering her work in a regional ENP, Susan described it as “the career trajectory thing”:

> In the field, you know, it’s not exactly clear and I think within the land conservation field it’s kind of evolving, you know, what are the key roles and what are the key leadership roles? I mean, yeah, there’s obviously executive directors at all these organizations, but what are some of the other key roles that these organizations really need, chief operating officers, chief financial officers, so I think that part of the challenges that those that kind of organizational structure, you know, the field as a whole hasn’t thought it through a lot.

Living in a low-population area, Carrie experienced the “career trajectory thing” in terms of the limited number of job openings offering advancement in her areas of interest:

> You know the average tenure [in this state] for, you know an executive director is like twelve years or something, and, which is incredible and uh in some ways has to do with the fact that there’s only so many jobs here in that field [she laughs a bit], so once you find a good one, people tend to stick with it I think, um, but I’m
definitely at a place where I’m kinda trying to figure out what my next thing is
gonna be that, you know, I don’t, I know I’m not gonna be [here] for another five
years or ten years.

Whereas Carrie considered her career trajectory in terms of what will happen to
her if she decided to leave her current organization, others keenly feel the sensitivity of
their organizations to the vagaries of soft funding, and wondered about the stability of
their careers even within their own organizations. Though he now occupies the top post
in his wildlife conservation organization, Henry wondered what might happen to his
organization if it hits rocky economic straits in the future: “there’s a little bit of this sense
of uncertainty of, you know, that my skills set, if it were to happen that, that my
organization were to not survive this coming recession.” Nora too realized that “it is kind
of risky…to put all of your eggs in this basket, that…is…you know, so dependent on soft
funding and memberships and things like that.” Working in a world where “there are so
many challenges and your future is somewhat…somewhat uncertain,” she felt that
regional ENP professionals need to have “a little bit of a tough skin” and have to be
“someone who’s willing to take chances, you have to be kinda a risk taker.” Tara
experienced a similar feeling in her regional ENP, where there is “always the question of
whether my job is still going to be there for the next year.” Tara felt the risks involved as
well, and that leaves her feeling somewhat helpless: “You can’t help but wonder, I mean
it sort of depends on the politics of the situation I guess.” This feeling of helplessness
“can be really, um, frustrating and you know I would definitely say that that’s another
low point and I know that that’s not just that particular position, that happened in a lot of places."

*An Innate Drive Toward ENP Work: “Just a part of my fiber”*

Whether it be the question of how to progress in the field or how to just get in it, the world of the regional ENP professional is fraught with questions, roadblocks, and challenges. Considering the challenges encountered all along the way, it is reasonable to wonder what brings these participants into this sector in the first place.

Reflecting on the struggles she deals with as a regional ENP professional, Nora stated flatly that “I don’t think everybody’s cut out for this work.” This, of course, begs the question “Who is cut out for this work?” Eight of the participants felt that their work in ENP world was due at least in part to something innate in their personality. While they could—and certainly did—point to clear experiences in their lives that influenced them to pursue the work that they had, they also saw their entry into the field as something that, as Carrie said, was “naturally” a part of their make-up. Tara repeatedly referred to “my personality” as being a factor in what both drew her into the work and kept her engaged in it, and Amy summed up her transition from activism to education by saying she just “didn’t have the personality and skills to be fighting for certain issues.” Carrie laughed under her breath as she described how her professional work spills over into her volunteer time, “I mean it’s just my personality that I’m an organizer kind of person, so I can’t help myself from volunteering for all these different things.” Reflecting on the previous person in his director position, who left after burning out, Casey asked, “What in his personality….allowed him to be able to think that that was going to be a, one a successful
way to run the organization or two, a way that, to sustain himself?” Considering the
techniques she implemented for resilience in her own work, Michelle said they arose
from “probably just personal predisposition.” Seth felt that his desire to work in the ENP
world was “just a part of my fiber.” Whether expressed as a “natural” process, or as a
part of their “personality”, “predisposition”, or “fiber,” these participants felt that, as
Nora said, “You have to be a certain kind of person to, to wanna be in this.”

**Ethical Accord:** “**Unless I was working in this field I think my conscience would
be nagging a little bit**”

While aspects of an innate personality appeared to be powerfully in play as my
participants explained their passion for this work, another equally compelling aspect
appeared to be the sense of ethical accord that they felt in choosing the work that they
have. Describing his motivation to educate the public through the farm education center
he directs, Jared saw his work as an obligation of his conscience, a voice he must answer
to: “I think you wanna feel, uh, good with your conscience at the end of every day, so
that’ll probably get ya’ up better the next day…. unless I was working in this field I think
my conscience would be nagging a little bit.” Daloz, et al. (1996, p. 197) described in
their participants an expression of the “double negative,” in which the participants,
feeling so driven by conscience into their work “couldn’t not” do it, a feeling Jared
expresses when he says that “to not act” was not an option.

The work they are doing appears to be synonymous with the self they perceive, it
is what they are called to do, who they are called to be, and they feel a responsibility to
answer that call. Seth expressed it in saying “I’m psyched to be working at a place where
I’m doing exactly what I want somebody desperately to be doing somewhere,” and that this opportunity was “an alignment that’s pretty cool in my perspective and I’m lucky [because]….my professional work is, is specifically what I personally want to see happen.”

Seth felt a kind of inner peace in having constructed a lifestyle where “it’s not really like a massively different attitude towards you know my personal agenda or work agenda.” Henry also was driven by a need for inner alignment between the self he perceives and the self at work in the world, which created within him a feeling of unshakable personal responsibility despite temptations to act otherwise. He explained that he periodically thought:

Oh man, I’d love to, I’d love to, you know, buy a Porsche, live somewhere with a big pool, but then you realize, you know, even more than that I’d love to continue doing what I’m doing and trying to change perceptions and attitudes because I think that’s where we need to go.

In a similar vein, Tara said, “There’s a reason I went into the field that I went into, because I enjoy it and I feel passionate about it,” and that despite the financial attractions that other types of work might offer her and her family, “I’m the kind of person that will pretty much do anything I have to do in order to make it work… I will take on three jobs so that I’m able to do the work that I want to do.”

The drive toward alignment between self and work appeared to be a powerful force in bringing all of these people into the environmental “work they want to do,” and for several the choice to go specifically into environmental nonprofit work (as opposed to
for-profit or government work) was clearly a part of that package. Carrie recounted that “When I graduated from college...I definitely knew I, kind of, wanted to be working in nonprofits...I didn’t even consider any other kind of job really.” Driven into environmental work by a strong need for alignment between the self and the work that they do, these participants felt that working outside the ENP sector might throw that alignment out of whack. Amy’s first foray into the environmental world after college found her in the for-profit sector, an area she left quickly, feeling that, “All my life I had never envisioned myself working for a for-profit agency and I had no desire to continue doing so.” Contrasting her current regional ENP watershed work with a government environmental position, Nora said “there’s obviously a lot of politics in working for the state, it’s inherently that way and...it’s just, that in itself would be really challenging for me...just having to swallow whatever comes down from above.” Whether expressed in terms of “alignment” or “passion” or otherwise, for Nora and the other participants, the ENP world was not one that they just happened into—it was the result of a conscious choice to express their personal beliefs through their professional work. In the following section, I will look at how participants’ undergraduate experiences influenced their decisions to enter into the regional ENP sector and how those experiences have helped to both inform their work and sustain them in it.

Entering the Undergraduate Years—the Transition to Commitment

Early Encounters With the Other: “It was like this whole mind opening experience”

Inasmuch as participants often expressed their environmental work as the natural choice for them, they could also point to definite experiences that led them toward it.
Most of these occurred during their undergraduate years; those that didn’t were related to travel. During these travel experiences, they had powerful encounters with “the other,” this “other” being a person or group of people that lived life differently from what they had previously known, opening the participants up to both the myriad ways life was lived by others and the myriad ways they could live their own lives. Jared described visits to Latin America where he was allowed to “see on a different level poverty, see on a different level, um, social injustice, and really just feel an obligation to, for service.”

Amy also had the opportunity for travel during high school, taking her to visit Russia’s remote Lake Baikal. During that visit she “really connected with the area and people” and felt an “immediate affinity” for the vast body of water and the communities living alongside it, an affinity that she directly links to her current work in protecting a major western freshwater lake. For Seth, a transformative travel experience occurred on a family trip to visit a friend of the family in Canada. In contrast to the rather standard path his parents had gone down, this family was into the “hippy-dippy thing.” He remembers of the encounter:

I visited this family and it was like this whole mind opening experience, like “Oh wow!” It was like, eating granola and bean sprouts and meditation and chimes, you know wind chimes, and crystals and all this stuff that always, that made a big impression, so I think, you know there was somewhere there was always this like, like stuff in the background about alternative ways of living and knowledge.

Assessing both his past and present Seth saw travel as an important part of his formation and a “portion of the lifestyle that is important to me.”
Coming into Environmental Programs (ESP)

Undergraduate institutions differ in terms of when students are expected to declare a major; some require it when applying and others don’t require it until students are one or more years into the undergraduate process. Some of the participants in this study came into college with a course of study in ESP already determined and others made that decision later in the process; regardless of when they made the formal decision to be ESP majors, none of the participants said that they arrived on campus completely committed to the decision, and certainly none of them felt anywhere close to certain about a future in the ENP sector. Rather, their commitment to an ESP academic track and to an ENP professional track was something that was nurtured and grew during the course of their undergraduate years. In telling their stories of this transition, the participants pointed to a number of different influences, both academic and extracurricular.

Undergraduate Encounters With the Other: “Whoah!...it just rocked you back”

Jared, Amy, and Seth noted the influence of travel, and the ensuing encounters with other-ness, as a source for motivation and direction in their pre-college years; Through those travel experiences, they were exposed to others with different ways of perceiving and living in the world; and through that exposure, they had their own feelings of possibility broadened. For Jared, Amy, and Seth, the importance of travel only became more acute during the undergraduate years; and for several others, travel during the undergraduate years had a significant influence on their formation as environmental professionals, expanding their notions about life and exposing them to some of the
injustices it contained. Michelle traveled to Ecuador during her undergraduate years, living with a family that, as she said “accepted me as a daughter.” Living with her Ecuadorian family, she “learned a lot about how they live and their challenges,” challenges that were often caused by global powers that took away the natural resources at unfair prices. Seeing this drove home to her how fortunate we are here, but also left her with the feeling that “it’s hard to accept that we aren’t doing more here because we’re so fortunate with what we have,” a feeling that propelled her forward in her interest in environmental work. Carrie studied abroad in Costa Rica, during which time she learned about some of the impacts associated with coffee growing, and though she said “I don’t know if it really helped me in my work” she did say that “it was a really great experience and it kind of, I think, directed me towards some of the community development work that I’m in now.”

For Jared, the learning associated with travel came in contrasting portions of his undergraduate education with what he saw being lived in other places. Discussing this contrast, he explained:

I mean Amory Lovins used to come down all the time during, you know, you know…but goin’ from like a…Boulder and the technology center, there’s a, there’s another place there, NREL is right there, the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, or something that’s, you know it’s…s-s-sophisticated, corporate testing grounds, but you know, who cares, whatever, they’re testing solar panels, they’re not even using the energy for anything productive, they’ve just got a meter on ‘em sort of thing, a, you know, all that…uh…in the face of goin’ down south
or goin’ to ya’ know, somewhere, to a real village somewhere where they had to figure out where to get your water from, you know, you had to run a pipe up, up a hill and stick it in, build a little dam…..that, that seemed a little bit more essential to me.

Following our interview, I worked for the day with Jared reroofing one of the farm structures (in the pouring rain). Our conversation returned to the role of travel in his own personal and professional development. Reflecting on our conversation and writing in my field log that evening, I noted:

Travel, particularly outside the U.S., was another thing of which he is strongly in favor, feeling that it brought a social justice perspective to the course of study, by showing the multiplicity of ways people can live (and live more lightly on the land) and by showing how different people are impacted by environmental change.

While Henry wasn’t able to travel to foreign locations as an undergraduate, he felt fortunate to have visitors from such places in his classroom. He recounted the experience vividly and energetically:

I took an environmental third world course, it was an Indian professor, you could barely make out what he was saying because he has an accent, but he would tell you stuff about the hypocrisy of, you know, the western life that a lot of people know now, like the average energy use of, of a Canadian in that case, versus an African and things like, oh well we banned DDT in Canada but what we do, we still make it here and then they ship it and then they grow coffee and that, and
then they ship the coffee back to us, and you know, he was every day he was, there would be like a dozen or two dozen of these things that just rocked you back, like “Whoah!”, so that’s where I learned about the world, is through environmental studies courses, the way things really, really worked, and that has, I think I’m much less of a naïve person, you know, and they say perspective is a virtue, that’s where I got my perspective on the world.

Whether these encounters with the other occurred abroad or on their own campuses, the encounters held lasting power and influence in the lives of these participants. The experiences provided them a new lens through which to view their previous experiences. Equipped with these new ways to understand their previous experiences, they were compelled to chart a new future.

**Faculty and Staff Roles in the Transition to Commitment**

Henry’s experience of the other—a foreign professor who exposed him to lives lived elsewhere—affects his understanding of the life he leads here. While this particular encounter entwines both a place and a person, it indicates the power that individuals—whether college faculty or staff—had in undergraduate formation of my participants. These faculty and staff played important roles in helping my participants to “learn the problems,” in aiding them in processing that learning, and in constructing positive opportunities for engaging in the problems.

**Learning the Problems: “Someone’s gotta work on this stuff”**

While the sheer scale of the environmental problems ENP professionals deal with on a daily basis is noted in the literature as a factor in prompting professional burnout
my participants frequently mentioned what Casey termed “learning the problems” to be a vital part of their undergraduate formation. They felt that learning about the scale and complexity of the environmental challenges the planet faces, though painful to learn and difficult to digest, has both motivated and informed their work as ENP professionals in the ensuing years.

Jared spoke at length about the simultaneously painful and motivational side of this learning, saying that “it reinforced the reasons why I initially got into it” and describing how

...all the knowledge that was derived from the environmental sciences program, which seemed to be, you know, four years of...uh...of environmental calamity, you know, it wasn’t, it wasn’t good news [but it] reinforced, motivated, shaped the basis for...gettin’ here.

Like Jared, Casey entered college with an interest in environmental issues that was strengthened as he learned more about it through his program:

I grew up on a small farm in [my state] where you know we ate our own vegetables, you know we raised cows that we milked and um made cheese and butter and yeah, so a very kind of rural experience, um, yeah I remember just riding my bike and you know stopping at the brook and like scooping up handfuls of water to drink and to, to go to [my university], go through the environmental program there and like really learn the problems that we have and you know the state of our planet on so many levels.
With knowledge, it seemed, came also a sense of responsibility. Casey said that
the learning “get’s you motivated that, you know, someone’s gotta work on this stuff,”
and he realized that, now equipped with this new information, that “someone” was him.
Several others felt that the information they received through their environmental
programs left them with a duty to act—a duty that others who had not had the opportunity
to receive the information might not be expected to have. But they saw this responsibility
as a gift rather than a burden, as evidenced by Jared’s view that

…people on many basic levels don’t, haven’t been given this information,
adequately explained [and] I think it’s really difficult to find the motivation unless
you have received adequate facts…on that..and so…you know I’m definitely
blessed to, to’ve received a lot of this knowledge.

More so than any particular character trait or aspect of his personality, Jared saw this
knowledge as being fundamental to his progression into environmental living, and felt
honored to receive it. He explained:

I don’t think that I’m, any more compassionate or any more, uh, willing to, to
give, as far as myself and anybody else, I feel like I have the knowledge that
makes it…so, uh…to do anything else would be sort of be foolish (chuckling),
um, whereas I think people are comin’ at it from the other end of things the other
spectrum where, uh, they’re, they would believe that it’s foolish to, to go down
this road of hard work, sacrifice…um, conservation, why conserve?…unless you
understand the fundamentals of, the rationale for conservation.
Despite the duty to act that he felt in learning the problem, Henry felt comparably grateful for the information he received, saying “I think I’m much less of a naïve person, you know, and they say perspective is a virtue, that’s where I got my perspective on the world and, and really the will to change it, and when things are tough it can carry you through.”

Processing the Problems—The Role of Faculty: “Kindling a fire”

In coming to learn the problems, these undergraduates came to feel both motivation and a responsibility to act in addressing environmental issues. There were mixed feelings, however, as far as how active a role faculty should have played in the process of converting learning into action. Jared said he was “Digesting a lot of that information, and trying to formulate, you know, what to do from there” and while the information helped to “kindle a fire” it took some personal “thinkin’ it through, sort of reflection and analyses and…to a degree figurin’ out what sacrifices… what…what you want me to do with this knowledge” that he felt blessed to receive. He shared an illustrative moment in describing “A brainy faculty guy that was, you know, high, on his way up the, the climate change loop, who was, you know, was…very factual, very precise about climate change [who] presented the facts and we could do whatever the heck we wanted to with ‘em.” Expressing parallel sentiments, Carrie felt that while her program provided her with “the technical information that I need” it was very research and science-oriented, such that the kinds of opportunities for applying her knowledge in the “nonprofit world was not really talked about very much in my program.”
Seth experienced a similar kind of approach in his program, but viewed it differently. He explained that “the program really didn’t uh, advocate very much on the political activist side of things” but on his campus, he remembers:

There was enough in the sort of private sector of people getting involved and the clubs of getting involved sort of the emergency response, crisis kind of um, standard activist kind of side of things but the academic program in my perspective was always really you know, just really didn’t bother to…ham it up on that stuff, and so I think that was really powerful role modeling, um, for students to realize that there’s you know, there’s multiple ways to embrace you know seeing, seeking a difference.

He appreciated that in his program there was “Not so much making a lot of judgments about who was right or wrong, it was just like, “Well because of this policy, this forest is getting cut down and, you know, it causes the loss of this” and it was like dot, dot, dot, you be the judge.”

*Opportunities for Engagement—Class Projects: “The fundamental stage in my growth as an activist”*

The curious thing about this difference in opinions regarding how explicitly they felt their instructors should have been in calling them to action, these same participants—and several others—expressed ideas suggesting that their faculty’s construction of the curriculum created valuable opportunities for engagement, opportunities that more subtly but just as directly provided both fuel during their undergraduate years and learning that lasts with them today. Jared recollected a “very powerful” class, led by a “very service-
oriented woman” that was “very thoughtful, involved some, some projects and service-oriented work within the class.” The particular cause that Jared took on as a part of the course involved a gay marriage referendum going on in his state, and though the issue was not one directly important to him, he found the process of coming into activism and finding his voice within it to be a “pretty profound” process, describing the process in these terms:

Gettin’ active, at some level findin’ something that was like, ‘this is wrong and right now we can, we can address this issue…and you know it’s the, the, the basic, like the fundamental stages of the, of my growth as an activist…you, you recognize the situation where there’s injustice…and so, to not act, or to not participate with righting the wrong, is, you know, just because I don’t, I don’t have that particular passion [sexuality rights issues], so, um, growth as an activist, to see like that big picture and growth as an activist who, really for the first time, gettin’ involved in marches, in demonstrations, and….willing to participate to try to stand for what’s right.

Though the issue he was addressing as a part of this class project in an environmental studies course did not directly relate the environment, the social components of the problem, the encounters with different others, created learning that shaped his experience then and his actions now. The debate grew quite intense in the state, and those against sexuality rights were often quite vocal during demonstrations. Jared remembers, “You receive the same abuse [as homosexuals might]…ah, you know it raises a quotient of fear
in you as a person, and then to still be able to participate because you know it’s right, was...was a...very powerful to a degree...I think I’m less afraid maybe.”

As an undergraduate, Henry was in a joint honors program combining environmental studies and biology majors. While he appreciated the factual “learning of the problems” provided in his biology program, what he really appreciated about his environmental studies courses was the analysis of the social components involved, analysis that frequently occurred as a part of class projects.

From day one, we began to look at these environmental situations and they could be, you know, a lot of times they were local situations and a lot of times there’s a real social component to them, I remember doing a project on, there’s a neighborhood school of mine and there was, there was some debate about whether or not, because of budget cuts, they were going to um close the school or not, and what we, we received training in environmental studies in working with small groups, in small groups of people on a joint project and going and interviewing different folks and determining who were the actors and what was the situation, and doing these types of things, and I found that really valuable.

In the passage above, the “social component” that Henry referred to involved dynamics in the wider community, but he and others also expressed the value of such activist-oriented projects in stimulating inter and intra personal development as they both dealt with others within their own group and with factions outside of the group. These encounters provided a rich laboratory for personal skills development.
Inter and Intrapersonal Skills Development: “You really learn that…which sounds sort of hokey, but it’s true”

Carrie linked both the value in learning about community and the value in learning about small group dynamics, and the role that group projects played in the process, when she described a project involving debate over funding in the local school: “We received training in environmental studies in working with small groups, in small groups of people on a joint project and going and interviewing different folks and determining who were the actors and what was the situation…and I found that really valuable.” Michelle also spoke directly to the role that group projects played in creating venues for community relationship-building skills and small group skills. In considering what she learned in regards to the former of these two, she said:

Well, I think it’s good communication, you have to know the questions to ask, so, and um, make sure that you listen, like, really basic stuff but, it doesn’t always…happen, you know what I mean? Like sometimes you don’t ask or you don’t listen, or…you’re not ready to hear what people really need, so that was, yeah, and, and having to work on real world….problems are challenging.

And in considering what she gained in terms of small group skills, she said “You sort of learn that….those, those, types of collaborative skills, um, interpersonal relationships and how to work as a team, which sounds really hokey, but it’s true.” Henry agreed, describing how he enjoyed “interacting with people and getting your hands dirty….it encouraged these small group dynamics in a good way.” He contrasted the challenges—and resultant learning—of these interactional experiences with his strictly
science-focused courses by saying they “taught critical thinking, you know science you think, it teaches critical thinking as well, but in a much different way.” As a result of those experiences he said he has “made friends that I’ve stayed in contact with up until now.” Recollecting his own group work experiences on the sexuality rights project, Jared remembered that he and his classmates “kept in touch and lots of us worked on different projects in the years after that.”

There was some mention of intrapersonal skills development as well, though this wasn’t a feeling widely shared among participants, nor a feeling that any participant expressed intensely. Michelle mentioned that her general organizational skills improved and that in dealing with the many contingencies that arose during her class projects she learned to be both “really adaptable” and “flexible.” Jared alluded to the spirit of engagement and sense of empowerment these projects promoted when he described the process of “gettin’ active, at some level findin’ something that was like, ‘this is wrong and right now we can, we can address this issue,” a feeling Michelle also shared during an ecosystem restoration project, finding meaning and satisfaction in the fact that “we were actually doing something that was useful, so that was, that was good.”

*Practical Skills Transfer: “Wow, I should really be out there!”*

While my participants were largely positive in describing the technical information and opportunities for interpersonal skills-building they gleaned through their undergraduate ESP experiences, eight of the participants expressed that they would have liked a greater emphasis on providing them with practical skills that would transfer into the professional world and ease their entry into and movement forward in the ENP world.
Casey wished there had been more focus on the socio-political sides of ENP work, “how to do an accountability session on a, a you know an elected official or… the reality of what it would take to you know change a corporation’s decisions or to you know get policy makers to pass legislation, real practical stuff.” Tara summed up her views on the matter in this way:

I would have to say that the program that I went through really did not prepare me for working in a nonprofit world, you know, I think that it prepares you more for either going into graduate school or doing something in research or working in, um, working in sort of a government setting where you’re working on more technical tasks, that sort of thing.

Speaking to the gap between her academic training and her professional work, Carrie said that “One thing that I think is often missing is that connection between higher ed academia and sort of, and the environmental nonprofit professionals that are on the ground, you know running organizations.” Describing the tone at her elite small private college, she remembers thinking:

‘What do you actually do once you get out of here?’ It seems like [at my school] that was not really the focus, it was like, ‘We’re intellectual and we’re academic and we’re thinking about all these great things and, yeah, you just go figure it out, you know, once you graduate.’

Though his large public university setting was quite different, Jared also felt that both the information he was learning and the format he was learning it in did not prepare him appropriately for work in the ENP world. He slowly and thoughtfully expressed:
I don’t think [it] ever… gave us the opportunity to fail in any real sense… or to explore a situation that was beyond our control or beyond the control of the academic institution… the degree of…… reality… that’s associated with programs that are non, non-academic in nature, is really somewhat startling. I mean, we have to, we have to come up with the money to pay the bills… if we commit to a project we have to see it through… Timelines, you know… you, you can’t, uh, can’t get and extension.

Nora experienced the practical transfer available in the academic environment differently, noting that “If ya don’t have something to hand a teacher… it’s not, you’re not gettin’ very far either, so that was really important.” One the other hand, she and others felt that there were several business, administrative, and community organizing skills their ENP work has demanded for which their ESP education left them ill-prepared. Nora mentioned “how to run a meeting, how to, um, write a grant proposal… how to do accounting” and “creating a presence in the scene,” as among the “less ‘science-y’ skills” her undergraduate training did not address. However, later in the conversation, she said that despite the fact that she didn’t get that training as an undergraduate, she also didn’t think she should have. Nora was in the minority in that regard.

More typical was Casey’s feeling that “there’s probably more that could be done on the undergraduate level to really be preparing people for what it’s like,” a preparation that would include training in fundraising, political organization, and the important administrative aspects of being an ENP professional. Setting up the stage of hypothetical interview with a freshly minted ESP grad he imagined the candidate coming in and
saying “Yeah, I’ve read about all of this stuff and I’m upset about it.” His response: “So whoop-de-do!” One of Henry’s professors told him early on “Good marks and good references are a dime a dozen, what I look for is work experience,” advice that Henry heeded and advice that he has appreciated since, feeling that such experience is vital in moving up through the ENP ranks. While each of these participants enjoyed the scientific base their studies provided them, they wished that through a combination of class project work, site visits, and internships, they could have been more grounded in the realities of life as an ENP professional. As Amy succinctly summed up in considering the undergraduate balance between ESP coursework and actually getting out into the ENP trenches, “Wow, I should really be out there!”

Field Experiences: “It just makes sense”

Participants did mention a variety of valuable ways in which they were able to get “out there” and bridge the gap between the theory learned in their classrooms and the realities of day-to-day work in the ENP world. Seven of my participants found field experiences to be particularly valuable. Henry typified their feelings in saying, “I think the undergraduate degree is kind of the base and, and the foundation but then I think that you need the actual field experience.” Describing the value of the field experiences afforded to her during a wetlands ecology course, Nora said:

The kind of immersion that you get when you’re in a place, learning about things on the ground....that’s what I liked about a lot of the programs or the classes that I took as an undergrad is…um, you know, studying…wetlands, we’d go to a wetland, you know, [it] just makes sense…
In particular, she mentioned a trip to examine the Everglades’ ecology; she said the professor “was a little skeptical about whether we would remember anything” but that, upon returning it was clear that “we had internalized so much of that information…. it was pretty amazing.”

Other participants mentioned internships as being a particularly valuable type of field experience during their undergraduate training. Romero & Silveri (2006) indicate that most programs include internship offerings, but only about one-third of those programs require an internship for graduation. Nora’s program required an internship, and she felt that even if it had not, doing an internship to supplement her classroom coursework was a “no-brainer.” Remembering her own institution’s emphasis of classroom content over practical experiences like internships, Carrie’s said, “I wish there had been more of that when I was there,” instead, she experienced a program that seemed to express “We’re intellectual and we’re academic and we’re thinking about all these great things and, yeah, you just go figure it out, you know, once you graduate.” As such, she remembered “graduating from college and just feeling like, you know, not even knowing what the options really were.” Looking back on the challenges she faced and overcame in learning about the realities of ENP life, she is now trying to make the transition from college to ENP work easier for others: “I feel like as a, now someone who is like a leader or a professional in this field, that’s really important to me is to try and like reach out to students now and help ‘em out.”
The Extracurricular Context

Extracurricular activities provided my participants with many opportunities to build skills that they have been valuable in their lives as ENP professionals. Only one participant, Casey, said that he “mostly studied and, you know, hung out with friends, I didn’t like involve, I wasn’t’ involved in a lot of extra stuff,” and as a result felt that there was “nothing [he] could exactly point to” in his extracurricular experiences that helped to shape him as an ENP professional. Much more prevalent were feelings like those of Carrie, who spoke for many of the participants when she said, “for me the highlight was not the academic experience at all, it was much more the social experience.”

Communal Living: “The defining experience of my college years”

For Carrie and others, communal living environments were a particularly powerful part of the undergraduate extracurricular experience. This environment provided Carrie both with interpersonal challenges from which to learn and with a support network as she established herself as an environmentalist. Considering this environment, she told me that “one of the biggest influences” was the cooperative “Environmental House” that she lived in her sophomore and senior years. These housemates became her “core community” while in college, and she described the importance of having this experience in saying:

This core kind of group of people that had similar interests that, um, you know became a very tight knit group because you were forced to interact you know like any communal living situation, I mean more than I think your average dormitory…. this core group of twenty or thirty people, um, are all the people that
I, you know, the only people really that I keep in touch with from the college and...you know, we’re definitely, that, that was the, more of the defining experience for me, of my college years.

Other participants felt similarly strongly about the personal growth stimulated by their living situations while in college. Seth described his own experience living in a cooperative dormitory as follows:

Everyone had to facilitate, I mean it was like a rotational situation and um, and I’d, nothing like that, I’d never had that in my background, but I think that was pretty formative to realize you can do things in an anarchistic way where there is no hierarchy, there is no specific leader, but you can exercise leadership and participate in the self-management of a group so that, you know, so that, the purpose of leadership in terms of clarity, and direction, and recording can be achieved even without a leader.

For Michelle, academics and community living blended, as she lived on a dorm floor that was linked to a particular set of academic courses (Geology and English). Together with about twenty other students she navigated both the challenges of the academic coursework and of living together in community. One high point of the experience was getting to know a professor who was very involved in the student activities side of the campus. This professor recognized Michelle’s budding interest in Geology and invited Michelle to travel with her to Honduras as a research assistant, spurring along her interest in environmental work and starting a relationship that continues to this day.
“Pivotal,” “highlight,” “defining moment,” and “huge” were all words used by my participants in summarizing the importance of their involvement in student clubs, and organizations as undergraduates. Half of the participants expressed directly that involvement in student clubs and organizations provided another valuable complement to their academic experiences in developing as ENP professionals while in college. That said, the range of kinds of involvement varied. For some, activist-oriented student clubs were the focus. Others found involvement in more formally organized student activity or government organizations. Whatever the venue, their voices expressed that extracurricular involvement in student organizations provided them with invaluable laboratories for experimenting with leadership.

**Activist-Oriented Clubs: “Once you’ve represented”**

Jared had already begun his involvement as an activist when he entered the course (mentioned in the “Processing the Problems” section) that served to “kindle” that fire. Activism became central to his undergraduate experience and in building his resolve as a social justice and environmental advocate. Through these experiences, he built resolve as a person ready to stand for what he felt was right, regardless of the obstacles encountered. In the following quote he describes his involvement with sexuality rights issues and tries to piece together his thoughts about how the powerful experience of standing up for his beliefs has shaped who he understood himself to be and who he has become:

Once you’ve represented….like it, once again it sort of boils back down to like…I’m not involved as a homosexual in this discrimination, like I, I don’t face
discrimination because of any of these issues...so then... to be able to go into and represent without having that, like, passion, like I have passion for the environment, I really want to save the environment, like I feel that... to still be able to participate because you know it's right, was... was a... very powerful.

During this experience he encountered a lot of resistance from football players in his dormitory who were influenced by their coach's public stance against sexuality rights. Enduring their taunts and the taunts of people he encountered at various marches, he felt he built a capacity to stand firm and to "participate because you know it's right" despite the "quotient of fear that it raises in you as a person." Of the ensuing undergraduate years and the various activist movements he was involved with, he remembered "I was not wishy-washy about participating and, uh, organized resistance or um, positive, ah, positive demonstrations of support for, for other solutions."

Carrie too remembers the strong influence that student-organized activism had on her college career. She recounted that she was

...really involved with a lot of the, sort of, student activist groups on campus and involved with environmental activism and, um, political activism and feminist activism....I was out there, you know, going off to protests and organizing conferences and bringing speakers to campus and doing letter writing campaigns and... I mean, for all kinds of different things, some of them environmentally focused, some of them not... so those to me were the things that, you know, those are the things that I remember when I think back about my college experience, and not so much, like, certain professors or certain classes.
As a result of these activist experiences, she remembered, “pretty quickly in my sophomore year saying ‘Yep, I think environmental science is what I’m gonna do’,” and though she continued her activism in a number of areas, environmental issues began to be a larger focus of interest for her. At her “incredibly progressive school” she didn’t encounter the kind of resistance that Jared did; she remembered activists on her campus being “pretty well-respected by most of the student body,” but just the same, she did encounter some feelings of difference: “If nothing else they were like, ‘Oh, good for you that you have time to go and spend doing all this stuff because, you know, I’m too busy studying, doing what everyone else is doing.’” Through these feelings of difference she too appeared to be developing an activist identity. She was also developing many skills that serve her well now in her work as an ENP professional:

I think I definitely, um, you know, learned leadership skills and I learned a lot about facilitating groups and group process, decision-making processes….when I think back about it, I think those are the kinds of things that have probably really stuck with me in terms of skills that I use on a day to day basis….how you approach conflict resolution, how you approach just having a meeting, and facilitating it in a productive way.

Clearly, activist-oriented student groups had a powerful influence on these two participants, but it is important to note that the activist-orientation of environmentally-oriented students on campus was experienced negatively by just as many of my participants. Describing his transition from activist-oriented groups to more mainstream political organizations on campus, Seth said:
I think when I shifted from a lot of more environmentally-oriented groups into student government purely I started to see that, you know, that actually we can’t be like super...extreme and you know, you know there’s a place for some sense of balance and concession...and was realizing, well OK, I can see how it’s so hard to change and the, the really extreme vocalization of the need to change is not actually making it any easier to change and maybe there’s places to work in a different pattern that could actually you know move things forward better.

He went on to credit that realization with moving him toward his work in directing an education-oriented land conservation program: “I think uh that’s why I’m in like a, I’m in like now in an environmental activist space that’s really slow, I’m talking about educating.”

Amy experienced a similar reaction to the activism of her environmentally-oriented peers. She felt as though many of her peers were “reactionary and would just support a cause without necessarily knowing much about it.” Through her encounters with them she realized that she “didn’t have the personality and skills to be fighting for certain issues” and that she “was much more interested in understanding the issues and in making sure others understood the issues as well.” She felt as though many of her peers were reactionary and would just support a cause without necessarily knowing much about it and she was more interested in understanding the issues and making sure that others understood the issues as well. She realized she “wasn’t really into activist work and was much more of an educator.” Sometimes we learn through positive experiences and sometimes we learn through negative ones; either way, the learning is valuable—and for
these four participants activist-oriented student clubs played a valuable role in forming their professional pursuits in the ENP world. In Chapter Five I discuss in greater detail the varying reactions that students can have to student club and organization involvement and some of the resulting implications for college personnel involved in such programming.

*General interest student organizations: “I wish everybody could’ve been student government president”*

Many of my other participants were not involved with specifically activist-oriented student organizations, but expressed that they found involvement in student organizations to be enriching and important in their development. These participants’ experiences ranged from those peripherally associated with environmental issues to those without any direct associations whatsoever; regardless of the clarity of the apparent link to environmental issues, all these participants found their involvement to be important in building their capacities as ENP professionals.

Michelle laughed as she described the professional and personal growth experiences in her student club. Calling herself an “organizational person,” she described the multiple roles involved in ENP work and compared that to her time as president of her university’s outing club, saying “I think I’m just used to being in a little bit over my head typically, um, you know running, running a club like the Outing Club.” The Outing Club also surrounded her with similarly interested others who provided her with a network of support that strengthened her personal commitment to environmental work. Of this, she said:
I mean it was such a great feeling to take kids out into the wilderness for a weekend and understand that they’d made a choice not to go party, not to go, you know stay up all night and not do their homework or whatever but just to take them out for a weekend into the wilderness and teach them how to take care of themselves.

She enjoyed teaching them how to take care of themselves and how to take care of the environment as well. Teaching her trip participants about techniques for taking care of both themselves and the environment aided her in coming to understand the importance that environmental work would have in her future:

…taking care of themselves meant, you know, picking up after themselves, learning how to go to the bathroom in the woods responsibly, um, make their own food responsibly, um, take care of themselves in terms of water and understand that we can’t you know just drink water out of the streams and how we treat that water and dispose of it, um, I think that made a lot of connections to begin with.

In addition to the personal and career connections occurring during her time with the Outing Club, Michelle felt that the experiences also provided her with important opportunities for “getting outside and really enjoying and having that connection with the place that we’re trying to protect so much.” Through paddling on local waterways and backpacking in the nearby mountains that feed them, she said, “I feel like I, I know this place a little bit better and I know what there is left to really protect.”

Though many of the clubs and organizations with which my participants were involved did focus on environmental issues, several did not; nonetheless, those
participants found the inter and intrapersonal skills development opportunities available in those experiences to be readily transferable to the environmental world. As with Carrie, Amy did not recollect any particular academic experiences as being really pivotal in her development as an environmental professional; what stood out in Amy’s mind were her experiences with the new student orientation program on her campus. During her four undergraduate years, she became very involved in planning and presenting the program to incoming students. Under the tutelage of the program’s particularly memorable director, she worked with a group of students in “planning projects, making some mistakes, and problem solving my way through them,” coming away from the experience with a much greater array of organizational skills.

Seth found his growth edge in transitioning from activist-oriented student organizations to his university’s student association, where he eventually became president. Joining the more mainstream world of student government, he saw an alternative to the activist groups that were “more fire than substance.” Interacting with faculty and staff advisors, he saw a more “calm and grounded presence” was perhaps more beneficial and productive than the “youthful energy” of the activist groups. These advisors coached him in thinking through the processes involved in achieving change, and in the human motivations involved. Rather than focusing solely on what he wanted to achieve, they challenged him to

…think about what their, what the fears are that’re causing that reaction, that are causing us to have to be shrill and maybe there’s a way we can tone our voices and have a better discussion,” that whole you know, students I think when we
were young, didn’t really want to imagine compromising you know or, or cutting a deal, and I think when I shifted from a lot of more environmentally-oriented groups into student government purely I started to see that, you know, that actually we can’t be like super...extreme and you know, you know there’s a place for some sense of balance and concession and, uh, so I think those are some things that I learned about while I was in school.

Entering into the world of student government was “awesomely rewarding” to Seth, as he said, “I wish everybody could’ve been student government president.” He appreciated learning about the political aspects as well as the more hum-drum administrative aspects. Considering the feelings he had during his activist days protesting NAFTA at the university with his later involvement with promoting diversity as a student government official, he remembered:

There was some frustration [during the NAFTA issue] that things weren’t moving as fast as my colleagues had wanted it. As I got more involved in student government I started, through the diversity issue, started to see a lot more about the art of compromise and the art of, of not freaking people out and uh, because then I was on the other side of the fence with students from the ALANA community really wanting to push on some goals and some, some structural adjustments to the [university’s] recruitment pattern and uh you know I would learn from both sides, like well why is it so important for this side, why is it so hard to change on the other side? And was realizing, well OK, I can see how it’s so hard to change and the, the really extreme vocalization of the need to change is
not actually making it any easier to change and maybe there’s places to work in a
different pattern that could actually you know move things forward better.

The regional ENP world is not a popular path for ESP graduates; this is perhaps not surprising, considering the challenges that world presents. Nonetheless, it is the path the participants in this study chose—and chose quite consciously. Attributing their choice to a host of factors ranging from an innate drive to the influence of faculty advisors, the participants in this research plunged ahead into the world of regional ENP work, a world within which they have stayed. In the next section, I will explore what they attribute to that ability to sustain themselves in the often challenging ENP world.

Sustaining Themselves in ENP Work

In the first part of this chapter, participants expressed the challenges they felt in their work as regional ENP professionals. Tight finances, daunting problems, profound complexities, and an often painfully slow process for change, all conspire to make for a challenging work environment, an environment in which many do not endure (de Boer, 1997; Snow, 1992a; Sohr, 2001). Yet, in the face of those challenges, the participants in this study have persisted. To what do they attribute their ability to persist where others have departed? During the course of each interview I explored this question and in the section below I present the stories they told me. Though each participant’s story is unique, their shared story emphasizes the force of place, community, collegial networks, and both learning and sharing learning with others in sustaining them in their work as regional ENP professionals.
Feeling the Power: “I really understand what’s going on around here”

Transitioning from collegiate ESP academics to the environmental work, the power of place prompted Carrie to seek a job in the region so close to her heart, naturally leading her into the working specifically with regional ENPs:

I, you know, certainly had the whole experience of coming out of college and thinking, “What am I gonna do?” and I, and I had sort of narrowed myself down and I said “I want to work in an environmental nonprofit somewhere in New England, ‘cause I grew up in New England and I didn’t want to be too far away and I didn’t want to be in a big city, those were my basic criteria of looking for a job.

Given the competitive nature of entry into the ENP world, Carrie found it necessary to make some concessions early on. Putting aside the city-size criteria, she took a job “in the middle of Boston, it doesn’t fit my rural criteria but it was fine, you know, for the year and a half that I was there.” When that organization folded, she took it as an opportunity to relocate to a place she felt a greater affinity toward, coming to work for a smaller organization in a small city in Northern New England. Though she knew that working in a smaller organization and in a lower-population area might limit her professional opportunities, she was content with prioritizing “the importance of place,” a prioritization that “in many ways that has been more important to me than like any particular career path.”
Seth also felt an attraction to his roots in tandem with his professional pursuits. As a part of his work directing a town land conservation organization, he currently oversees the farm where as a youngster he first developed an interest in the environment. He expressed feeling “psyched” to be working in an organization strongly connected to the place and people he grew up around, “helping foster a sense of you know deep-seated passion, well compassion for the land really, and also rekindling the idea of connecting to a community, uh, based on my personal experience having grown up here.” Indeed, he felt that his experiences constitute a kind of “rare story,” a story which has played prominently in his sustaining him in his current position:

I have more of a propensity to want to stick around than if I did the exact same job for the same type of organization in Oregon, you know, I mean it might be there would always something else you know like until you really belong, at least around here it’s sort of like, well I mean if anyone belongs, I kinda do.

Michelle was not originally from the region she went to for undergraduate studies, but she said she felt that a “connection with the place that we’re trying to protect so much…was fairly well fostered in my undergraduate experience.” She pointed to experiences with her university’s outdoor education program and field work in her courses as being integral in fostering that connection. Of her time with the outdoor education program, she remembered:

I had the opportunity both in leading trips and in participating in trips to really explore this watershed and know the resources that are here, whether it’s hiking or canoeing or, you know, backpacking, cross country skiing, caving, whatever it
was! Um, I feel like I know this place a little bit better and I know what there is left to really protect.

This understanding was complemented by field experiences in her ESP, both as a student and then as a TA. Considering those experiences, she remembered “getting out to those locations and learning about the really great ancient history of what this valley is all about,” building a sense of understanding of the place she was in and a greater sense of purpose in her professional work.

It’s really neat and you know you look around the landscape and say “I kinda know why that mountain looks like that or I know why there are scratches on this erratic rock” and, you know you, you get that real feeling like “I really understand what’s going on here.”

Both the lifestyle and learning now figure into sustaining her in her professional work.

Describing the pressures of dealing with the endless emails and stacks of paperwork her job demands, Michelle explained how her connection with the region helps her to cope:

I luckily know quite a bit about [the mountains of this region] and when things just seem to be too overwhelming it’s time to go get out in the field….and really get some grounding and understanding of why it is that I’m sitting behind this desk….getting outside and really enjoying and having that connection with the place that we’re trying to protect so much.

Considering what it would be like to work in a different region, Michelle felt that at least initially it would be more difficult. She would have more trouble motivating herself to work in protecting a region she didn’t understand as well and a region to which she didn’t
have so many personal experiences attached. “Other places I don’t think I might have that same strong connection, you could build it, but it wouldn’t come as easily.”

Such has been the case with Amy. Amy works for a regional ENP far removed from her childhood and undergraduate roots. During a high school study abroad program she felt an “immediate affinity” for the large lake next to which she lived. She now lives next to a large lake in the American West and works for an organization that runs partnership programs between these two lakes. Setting her east coast roots into the western soil took some time, but over time she mentioned “becoming more and more invested” in her new region. As she has learned more of the flora and fauna of the area, she has come to feel “at home there” and like it is a place she connects with and finds “worth saving.” Now that she has built this relationship, like Michelle, she has come to rely on her connection with the place as a powerful way to recharge herself for the work she does in protecting it. “When things are really hectic with lots of students here, if I’m able to get away for even a little time alone on the beach that is enough to recharge.”

The People of the Place: “Finding a place where I want to live and making connections in the community”

Amy mentioned another way that the power of place sustains her in her work, a power that was mentioned by some of the other regional ENP professionals that I interviewed as well. In working for a regional ENP, she has close daily contact with the environment her hard work is directed toward preserving. Living close to the shore of the lake she works diligently to protect, she said she finds strength in the fact that she “can see in a very real way what my efforts are directed toward.” Casey described a similar
kind of connection, one that fuels his work but also is the source of some pain. Growing up in the rural state where he now directs a state-wide environmental advocacy program, he fondly recounted “just riding my bike and you know stopping at the brook and like scooping up handfuls of water to drink.” Those fond memories propel him in his preservation work, and his daily contact with the places of his memory boosts his commitment in positive ways, but not also without a tinge of the negative, as he witnesses the pollution of the environment of his youth. As he said:

That’s been you know I think personally satisfying and exciting as we, you know, win most battles, but definitely challenging ‘cause, you know, I see on my drive home people fishing out of the river and I know that there’s mercury in those fish.

Casey’s comment also reveals another aspect of the power of place that my participants felt in their work—the connection between the natural communities they seek to preserve and the human communities embedded within those places.

As the community has become more attached to the educational center that he directs, Jared has, in turn become more attached to the community. Describing the evolution of his organization over the past decade, the following passage from Jared depicts the way in which my participants blended the natural and human communities in considering their attachment to place:

…as you go through it, you know, you start to see things taking effect…you start to see the plants taking hold, the community, sort of, becoming more aware, becoming more involved, becoming, you know, attached to the place and the land and the people.
Carrie blended the two as well, in telling me:

One of the things that has always been important to me… is feeling the importance of place, and, you know, wanting to be very place-based and so, um, you know in many ways that has been more important to me than like any particular career path, is finding a place where I want to live and making connections in the community.

Seth grew up in the town where he now lives and works. As a youngster, he visited the farm and land trust that he now directs, visits that set the course for arriving where he is today. Becoming more and more immersed in the land and people of his roots and helping those people, in turn, to deepen their sense of connection with the land and community, he said he was “psyched” to be “helping foster a sense of you know deep-seated passion, well compassion for the land really and also rekindling the idea of connecting to a community, uh, based on my personal experience having grown up here.”

His own story appears to be becoming more and more embedded in the place and the people that surround him; he mentioned he is “enjoying the texture of the story that I’m in” and that he gets a “kick out of coming into knowledge of a place more and more and uh, just knowing people in the community and the cast of characters and being one of those characters.” Seth sees his character as having been shaped by the story of his place and community and, in turn, he sees himself now helping to shape the future of that shared story:

When I was a kid I worked here…[and] as a product of this community I ended up on this end of the spectrum and so I know it can happen I know it’s possible
so, like I’m my own best example so….kids that I work with now that, I’m like, you know in ten years I hope they’re working in some place like this, or some, doing something, you know, for the, for the good side, for the good guys, and so I can see that you know that what I’m doing is gonna resonate through.

He found this to be “very motivating” and “a big part of my gratification” in continuing forward with the work that he does.

Susan also enjoys learning about the human stories connected to the land she has worked to preserve over the years. She enthusiastically described her previous position and the “nugget of resilience [and] re-inspiration” provided by “the phenomenally cool opportunity” of “meeting with land owners, seeing beautiful places and hearing and being inspired by the connection to those places that those land owners have.” Though her current job doesn’t provide that sort of connection, she has found ways to infuse her work with similar contact with the land and the community:

When I can go out and see a project that [my organization] has done, walk around on it, see how beautiful it is, when I can call up and speak to one of our stewardship people and I learn that she is running an outing club program that takes, um, twenty, um elementary school kids from very rural [areas] out onto our or other protected properties once a month, and that her outing club is the, is the highest subscribed extra-curricular activity at the school, that really jazzes me up, so I guess kind of the combination of physically getting out to our properties and then, um, that combined with chatting with our staff members who are all doing really, really cool things out on our properties, that is personally sustaining.
Susan now experiences the land directly, through stewardship members from the community, and from her organization’s own staff members. Nora also alluded to the entwinement between the land she protects and the other professionals in her region that she is working with to do so. An incident last summer made the connection between the place Nora is committed to and the professional community she has built within that place very tangible and real. In July a biologist found an algae bloom in the river central to her area’s watershed, the first time that this alga was documented in the entire region’s watershed. Immediately, she thought of her colleague Anne, whose watershed lies downstream from Nora’s, “So, that means it’s also Anne’s problem now, so I called her up “Hey Anne!” Together, the two of them brainstormed a strategy for solving a problem that paid no heed to municipal or political boundaries and had a direct effect on their shared place.

In total, all ten participants directly mentioned the importance of the particular place they chose to work and live in, making it seem to be a deeply felt emotion held by each participant in the group. Moreover, they referenced the sustaining power of place and the communities embedded within them over thirty times in total, making it one of the most deeply felt emotions of the entire group. Considering this breadth and depth of emotion for the human and natural communities in which they do their ENP work and the power that emotion has in sustaining them in their work, Michelle’s thoughts encapsulate it well:

I really think it comes back to if you know the place that you’re working on, if you have a connection with the land, whether you know you ski in the mountains
or you canoe in the rivers or you watch whatever types of birds come to your birdfeeder every morning, if you have a connection with the place I think that’ll fuel your passion and if you don’t I think this would be a much more transient job and it’s hard, a lot of people don’t last very long in these types of positions.

**Collegial Networks**

Whether they are simply sharing a cup of coffee with another staff member while commiserating about how to make ends meet on an ENP salary or gathering for a quarterly meeting with other professionals in the region to discuss how to control the spread of invasive species, many of my participants mentioned that informal collegial support networks were vital structures for sustaining their work in the regional ENP world. Whether these networks occurred informally or formally, whether the conversations explored the entwinement of personal and professional in the regional ENP world or stuck strictly to work-related matters, these participants found them to be essential structures in supporting their ability to persist in the profession.

*Informal Networks: “I don’t feel stuck in a silo”*

Participants’ responses indicated two primary factors that appear to be at play in promoting the formation of informal networks of support among my participants. First, environmental problems are rarely confined to political boundaries. Second, while the ENP world constitutes only 2% of all nonprofits (Wing, Pollak, & Blackwood, 2008), if one considers regional ENPs specifically, that number drops even more precipitously (Snow, 1992a), creating a smaller professional community which facilitates communication and connection. Nora alluded to these factors when she discussed her
own networks: “It’s a small state and you know it’s, it’s not hard to meet kinda everybody in the field, and creating those relationships just really, really helps, because then you know we all draw upon each other in the field.” These informal networks are established and sustained in a variety of manners, sometimes through a spur-of-the-moment phone call, other times through a pre-established, one-time meeting to discuss an item of interest or concern.

Tara laughed as she described the spontaneous conversations she shares with others in her field from time to time:

It can be challenging finding a way to meet, you know, your financial needs in certain situations and other people are going through that as well, and so just talking about the different ways that you can sort of make it work can sometimes give other people the, you know, the boost that they need to say “OK, you know, there, there is a way to make it work,” that kind of a things, or “Hang in there, you know, you’re, the work you’re doing is worth it” that kind of thing, you know, and so I think that camaraderie is definitely useful, and I think it just happens.

Carrie also felt strongly about the power of these kinds of casual “coffee cup” networks in sustaining her in her work:

I mean for me personally, I think that a lot of that, uh, resilience comes from, is a network of people that, friends, uh, really close friends that I’ve made through my work….so it’s helpful for me to, when I’m feeling frustrating with whatever it is that we’re dealing with to be able to, you know, call up my friend [and say] “Here’s what’s going on” and get some sympathy and some, some ability to, uh,
commiserate from that...so I don’t, I definitely, I think that’s helped me a ton in, in kind of sticking with this kind of work, is having this other outside network of people that are supportive and...I don’t feel kind of stuck in a silo, I feel like very, very well supported by the people around me.

In the quotes above Tara and Carrie described situations focusing on the personal side of their work, but certainly informal meetings allow space for melding personal and professional concerns found in participants lives as regional ENP professionals. Michelle entwined the two in fondly describing the occasional meetings she has with the other professionals in her watershed. She said that she enjoys

…really just connecting with those people and having that time to say “You know this can really not be fun sometimes and really challenging” and then something really great’ll happen and you’ll get to a meeting, like the meeting I described with the canal appropriation and it’s just this “Wow, we can do this!” feeling, um, but I think for me it’s all about making those personal connections and, and building that trust but also knowing people in different states and different countries really, and understanding the different approaches that they take, ‘cause there’s a lot to learn there when you keep, feel like your beating your head against the wall and then you say “Wait, let’s just look at a different approach, OK this could work, it’s new for this area, but this could work, this could be different.”

Whether it be getting together with her counterparts in other organizations to “kind of share and collaborate” or calling up “folks that I know and can call up when I have a
question,” Nora also found informal meetings with her colleagues to be important sources of inspiration and information.

Interactions with staff are another avenue through which these participants built collegial support networks informally. This support came both through direct interactions like conversations or just merely through working shoulder-to-shoulder alongside people they respect. Considering it “a source of sustenance” in his work, Henry mentioned how much he enjoyed interacting with his staff. Acknowledging that “when you have a group of people who are very committed and very driven and then you have limited resources, you know, that can be a recipe for conflict,” he nonetheless spoke of these interactions in largely glowing terms:

I mean all these people are working for nothing, because, you know, it’s something that they’re really interested in doing….their hearts are all in the right place, so, so, you know the people are great, and you’re not gonna get that in a bank, or at IBM, you know, or, or one of the big Fortune 500s….you’re not gonna have the kind of unifying thing, purpose, that’s brought everybody together, you know, so as far as that goes it’s really satisfying.

Susan, who holds an MBA from a top-tier Ivy League university, spoke in similarly glowing terms about the quality of people she encounters on the staff of her regional ENP land trust organization. She said that one thing that she…can’t underscore how huge it is, which is the chance to work with amazing people, who are just personally so committed to this work, personally so motivated, hard working, um, talented, I’ve just found that, you know, the
organizations I’m drawn to working for, and as I look kind of broadly across the field, and, and I should also preface this, you know, I went to business school, so I’ve seen a lot of other sort of organizations, institutions, businesses, whatever, so that, that element of the kind of co-workers you’re working with is a real personal bonus I would say to this kind of work.

For reasons of both personal and professional support, whether it be, as Michelle said, for “the relationships that you create and the connections you make” or, as Nora noted, for the creativity inspired when you “look up and say ‘Oh, this is what other people are doing!’” informal networks with colleagues both inside and outside of their organizations are a powerful source of sustenance for these regional ENP professionals.

*Formal Networks: “Folks to share ideas with and discuss ideas with”*

Structured opportunities for interaction provide participants with sustenance in ways similar to those provided via informal networks. These structured opportunities take several different forms. Sometimes they take the form of regularly-held meetings between partner organizations and agencies, and though the purpose and emphasis of these meetings is on a particular issue or agenda; other participants mentioned professional development programs in which they had participated. In both cases, these formal networks offer opportunities for sharing personal support and reinvigoration.

Describing the statewide watershed board that she has served on for several years, Nora said: “Those people are just a really great group to work, work with…. [and to] …share experiences and network and talk about things like ‘What is environmental literacy?’ those kinds of questions, so that, that’s been really great.”
Susan has sought and found support through a variety of professional organizations, among them the Young Conservation Professionals Network (“a lot of those folks are my age, have been though similar educational programs and are doing interesting things”), the Conservation Finance Forum (“a group kind of started out of Harvard, but has folks working on different conservation finance issues”), and the Conservation Finance Camp, which has met the last two summers “in this week-long conference, presentation, discussion, seminar format,” an experience “that’s been really sort of personally stimulating.”

Carrie mentioned the value of the professional development she has pursued as a professional, via both graduate school and other training programs. Moving into higher-level management she felt compelled to enter a master’s degree program in management:

One of the reasons that I wanted to do that was not only sort of for my own professional development, but to be able to have these conversations with other people and say ‘So, you know, how, how do you do it in your office, you know what do you do about when you have to fire someone?,’ or, you know, ‘How do you do your fundraising campaign?,’ you know and, and ask those questions that otherwise, you know, it’s hard to kind of sometimes create those networks of people to talk to about your work…so that was really great, and I really appreciated that.

Not too long after finishing her degree, she found that she “missed that, that other community of people to talk to.” Seeking out that kind of forum, she applied for and was accepted into a prominent environmental leadership development program, an experience
that has been “really great ‘cause it’s all people in environmental fields” providing her an opportunity for “looking at how other organizations function and the particular interests of mine and trying to bring it back to the work that I’m doing.” Expressing the value this opportunity has provided for both sharing personal support and building professional skills, she said it “has been a good balance between trying to like, really cover a lot of ground in terms of actual content but also leaving a little bit of space for, you know, you just get twenty interesting people in a room together and just letting people kinda…hang out and make connections with each other.”

The Potency of Learning

Both Susan and Carrie’s comments about their formal network-building experiences blend the sense personal sustenance and professional development that arise during those encounters. Sharing ideas with peers from other similar organizations, they have been able to build a sense of togetherness in the cause while also learning valuable professional skills as they listen to one another’s stories and experiences. Whether it occurred formally or informally, whether it occurred with other colleagues and peers or with members of the community, whether it bolstered their personal or professional capacities, time and time again, learning emerged as a powerful source of sustenance for my participants. Alongside the power of place, the potency of learning was the most often mentioned aspect when considering sources for sustenance mentioned by my participants. Moreover, the potency of learning held sway for them as both students and teachers. In the following section I will first explore the potency they experience as learners and then I will explore the potency they experience as facilitators of learning.
Commitment to Learn, Motivation for Learning: “Intrigued by the complexity of it all”

Time and time again, when considering both the compelling and challenging aspects of their work, participants linked those thoughts to learning—and they typically linked those two quite positively. Indeed, rather than perceiving the challenges of taking in new ideas and information as daunting or tiresome, they saw learning as a strong source of motivation and inspiration for them in their work. As the thirty-something director of a state-wide environmental advocacy organization, Casey has found there is plenty to learn, fueling him forward in his work: “I’m still motivated like there’s a lot more I can learn.” Having dedicated the past decade to learning the nuances of the farm and education center which he directs, Jared said he is still “intrigued by the complexity of it all…it’s not, not to me at all a boring existence…so, there’s definitely a lot to get your mind around, there’s no, no boredom in that.”

Nora has only been in her current position as executive director of a watershed organization for a short time, entailing a steep learning curve. She enthusiastically explained that a lot of what she was doing was “new, new to me, umm, and interesting working with a really dynamic, great group of people, but there’s, you know there’s communication challenges and…kinda those personal relationship challenges, um, which is great, I’m learning a lot!” Entering into the directorship of her organization, Carrie had to learn more about the “finance end” of things, an area she “didn’t really know anything about.” Rather than experiencing this as anxiety-provoking or nettlesome, Carrie said “it’s been good, ‘cause I feel like I’m still learning.” And, in an email exchange between Tara and me after her interview, she wrote to me about her pursuit of volunteer activities
as a way to advance her professional learning. She told me that “Something I forgot to mention that has been both challenging and helpful to me is my volunteer work,” and explained to me the many different venues in which she had pursued that, concluding, “These have just been ways to help myself learn more” while also building her repertoire of job skills.

Cresting the Curve, Considering New Classrooms: “I want to be constantly learning new things”

Describing what she enjoyed about a previous position, Tara felt “it was really interesting and I was learning all the time,” and considering her professional future she said “keeping your mind going, keeping you learning about things is, that’s really important to me.” Indeed, in considering the vital role of learning in her professional life, Tara said, “How I look at having a job [is] you know I want to be constantly learning new things.” This feeling resonated in Carrie’s words as well. As she told me, “You know one of my challenges has been trying to feel like I’ve been continuing to learn things.”

While the drive to learn provides these participants with powerful fuel in their professional lives, the downside of it is that their voracious appetites for learning can leave them hungry. As noted earlier, formal training programs can provide some sustenance, if temporary. Casey has participated in two prominent environmental leadership development programs, and he expressed interest in continuing his learning via similar programs:

…I mean want to get some more training [laughing], I think there’s more I can learn even in like management but also in, um, yeah just like how to…continue
you know learning on how to run an organization, I mean every time I’ve gotten training I get a lot out of it…

He enjoyed the opportunity to “just get some of the practical skills and get to practice skills” and felt that the experience provided him with both a curriculum and a space that was really helpful at the time in, in thinking um through that you’re a leader and people see you as a leader and, you know, things that you do or how you act influences others, that type of just like mentality, you know, things that you don’t necessarily always think about.

He told me that over time he has gotten a bit fuzzy on some of the material covered in the programs’ curricula. Now that he is in an executive director position he said he wants “a refresher on what they were teaching,” telling me:

I mean I think I had, did it right before I’d become an executive director, so it was helpful, but now I also feel like there were like things that they were teaching that I’ve forgotten, um, so if I could just like get a refresher and a reminder I could probably implement them now.

As noted earlier, Carrie’s participation in formal learning programs has been very satisfying for her and has been an important part of sustaining her in her work, but with her current program wrapping up, she was beginning to question how she would continue to feed her learning appetite. Talking with Carrie and considering her pursuit of first a graduate degree and then participation in the leadership program for environmental professionals, we shared the following exchange:
Kelly: Let me ask you sort of point blank here, one thing I’ve been hearing in the conversation is the importance of continuing education and the networking that happens with that, and so, at some point along the way you decided to go back to [the institution where she received her master’s] to sort of revitalize in that regard, and then you graduated from [the institution] and now you’re in [name of the professional development program], which is another leadership opportunity and that’s gonna last for another year or remainder of a year....once that program ends what a [Carrie begins to chuckle] what do you think things will look like for you?

Carrie: I don’t know, I mean, I anticipate that I’m gonna have that same, you know, antsy, you know, after a couple of years, like now, you know...what’s the next challenge?

Snow (1992, p. 37) noted “longevity counts” when considering the role that staff play in building an ENP’s capacity and stability in the long-haul. With that in mind, and considering the role that formal education has played in her persistence thus far, Carrie’s answer to the question of “What’s the next challenge?” is illuminating, but also alarming. She told me:

The next challenge may be, you know, jumping into a new aspect of nonprofit work you know where a totally different organization with a totally different focus, and that’s sort of the challenge is taking on a new beast, you know, um...I don’t see more education as necessarily being the answer to that for me.

So, for some of these regional ENP professionals, one of the very things that has kept them in the field—learning—may eventually lead them to leave the field. Yet, while the
power of learning as a source for sustenance may have its limits, it may still be among the 
most powerful tool for motivation and sustenance in these participants’ toolboxes. As 
Tara expressed in considering her own career trajectory:

   I never really thought that there would be a particular time that I would leave, you 
   know, some people can say “Well, I’ll be here for five years and then I’ll move on 
to something else,” you know I’m not the kind of person that can really say that, 
because it really depends on whether I’m still satisfied with the job that I’m 
doing, whether I’m learning, whether I’m still happy about what I’m doing, and 
so I think that’s really the factor that I would look at the most, in ten years I’ll be 
hopefully doing something that still is keeping me learning and keeping me happy 
with, and satisfied with what I’m doing.

Helping Others to Learn: “A point of inspiration”

   Given the sustenance that they derive in advancing their own learning, it is 
perhaps natural that they should find similar sustenance in advancing others’ learning as 
well, as evidenced in Jared’s comment that, “all the participants that come through here 
are, um, affected by the place, and so, what, what transpires there also is a point of 
inspiration.” Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the value some of my participants placed 
in “learning the problem,” in coming to better understand both the scale and technical 
intricacies of the environmental challenges we face. Having felt that this coming into 
knowledge was such an important transformation in their own lives, it is perhaps not 
surprising that they should feel a strong drive to share their environmental knowledge
with others. Making the connection between how learning has influenced him and how he hopes to influence others through sharing that knowledge, Jared explained:

I don’t think that I’m, any more compassionate or any more, uh, willing to, to give, as far as myself and anybody else, I feel like I have the knowledge that makes it…so, uh…to do anything else would be sort of be foolish [chuckling], um, whereas I think people are comin’ at it from the other end of things the other spectrum where, uh, they’re, they would believe that it’s foolish to, to go down this road of hard work, sacrifice…um, conservation, why conserve?...unless you understand the fundamentals of, the rationale for conservation.

*The Teaching in the Work: “There’s a sort of ‘light bulb moment’ that happens here”*

While the majority of my participants expressed a keen interest in sharing learning, most of them are not involved in work specifically targeted toward environmental education, nor do they envision themselves becoming environmental educators in the formal sense. Carrie typified this feeling in telling me:

When I found [my first ENP job] I was just like, “Oh my god, this is exactly what I want to do!” It’s like education-related, um, but it’s not, like I knew I really wanted to be in education, but I didn’t want to be a classroom teacher and so I had a lot of struggle over the years of kind of like, “What’s my place in the world of education?” Not being a third-grade teacher, you know, so [that job] was great for that and when I found out about it I was just like, “Oh my god, this is like, this is a sign!”
These participants seemed to enjoy roles where they were clearly educating people, but were less clearly defined as teachers. Tara works now as the education director of a land conservation and education organization, a position she moved into by chance while working for a natural areas mapping program. She explained:

A small piece of my job was doing education and outreach and, um, I found that I really enjoyed that part of the job, so that’s what sort of led me to where I am now and so I really enjoy doing it and you know I said I’m passionate about it.

Even though, as she said “we’re not formal educators here” and “it’s been challenging to sort of learn the lingo as far as education goes,” she told me she enjoyed running a program that creates an outdoor classroom to share environmental education with others:

I would say that I’ve had a lot of satisfaction in my job…. it just seems like a really good fit for kids to be outdoors learning about the natural world and for me it’s really, I get a lot of satisfaction out of seeing that connection….there’s at least one or two kids that have that sort of “light bulb moment” that happens here, and so that, that’s pretty great.

Henry also said he derives keen satisfaction in balancing the technical and scientific aspects of his waterfowl research and monitoring work with the educational component the work offers. Though the research and monitoring are what “keeps me coming back first and foremost,” he also said:

…a pretty close second is it’s great to work with the people, you know, and if you’re working as an environmentalist you get to work with the salt of the earth, these people, we have so many volunteers, that right from board members,
volunteer their time and expertise and a wide range of different experiences right
down to the guy that helps you blow up the loon raft, you know, or just wants to
call up and say “Hey I just saw this neat thing, you know, I saw twenty loons on
my lake, what does that mean?” and you can talk to these people, you can engage
them.

Like Henry, Michelle’s primary role as a program coordinator for a watershed protection
organization is not focused on education, but she too enjoyed the educational aspects her
job allows. She enthusiastically relayed to me how she will sometimes “jump ship and
run over” to help out for an afternoon at a nearby site where her program occasionally
offers educational programs for schools: “…little kids love it because you can walk
around and pick up, you know, pick up any rock and it’s usually got, you know, five to
fifty thousand different fossils in them….that’s really, that’s fun.”

*Education as Activism: “Maybe there’s places to work in a different pattern”*

Just as some of my participants seemed to enjoy roles where they are educating,
but are not teachers in the traditional sense, some seemed to enjoy roles where they were
changing minds, but were not activists in the traditional sense. Two of my participants,
Amy and Seth, explicitly mentioned this during our discussions. While undergraduates,
both began to feel as though they were not entirely comfortable in the traditional activist
role. Amy felt that many of her peers “would just support a cause without necessarily
knowing much about it,” whereas she was more interested “in understanding the issues
and making sure that others understood the issues as well.” Feeling that she “didn’t have
the personality and skills to be fighting for certain issues,” she has gravitated toward
educationally-oriented ENP work, where she is “staying neutral on the issues” and just working to communicate the information people need to make responsible environmental choices. Participating in both student activist clubs and student government while in college, Seth began to see that “the extreme vocalization of the need to change is not actually making it any easier to change.” Reflecting on this, he began to consider that “Maybe there’s places to work in a different pattern that could actually you know move things forward better, and I think uh that’s why I’m in like a I’m in like now in an environmental activist space.”

Working in this “environmental activist space” Seth felt he was working more effectively, though perhaps less obviously, to change things. Explaining his feelings at length, he told me:

I do tell people we are trying to save the world….there’s a huge structure that, you know, I’m not prepared to right now to confront directly but I think through our educational work, you know, there’s a, a sort of insidious aspect of what we do to change people’s perceptions about what’s important….I’m talking about educating, that’s like this is the total other end from this policy spectrum, you know, this is not like a rapid change….but I think I feel better now at this end of the spectrum than at the sort of the more loud activist side of things…I think that’s what I’ve come to rely on is that, that slow change is stronger change…

Despite his beliefs in the power of education as activism, Seth did confess to some doubts about its efficacy in the face of an environmental situation where “everything is going to hell in a hand basket.” Given that appraisal, he expressed
grappling with the question: “Where do we deploy our effort to teach and to demonstrate in the best way so we are making more of a difference and not just, not just for show, and not just an amusement?” Henry also expressed some similar doubts. Describing to me how he tries to balance the negatives with the positives when writing his “Director’s Message” in his organization’s newsletter, he said:

I feel like I need to let people know my thoughts on these things, but always end with a little bit of a positive twist, you know, like “Well if we can, if enough people can learn about these issues and spread it around to their neighbors we can change values and attitudes, and we can, and we will get, you know, come out of this,” when deep in my mind I think that’s a possibility but I’m not sure I believe it.

Nonetheless he persists in the face of the odds:

…ninety-nine percent of the people will just not care when you [educate them about the changes necessary], but one percent of the people will, and if that one percent of the people can talk to another one percent of the people you’ve just doubled your [laughing] message, so you just have to do what you can, and I feel that every day, I feel like it’s a losing battle, but it’s an honorable battle, it’s a good, it’s a good thing that we’re doing.

*Translating Science: “Making those connections that make things happen”*

In previous sections, I have presented participants’ feelings about how transformative it has been for them to learn the science about the environment and our environmental problems, and I have also presented their feelings about sharing that
knowledge with others and fostering similar transformation. One specific way aspect of that sharing of knowledge emerged in many of the participants’ comments, what one participant (Nora) termed “translating science.” These participants see themselves operating at the interface between the public and science, making the public aware of scientific research and assisting them in understanding its import. Telling me about her work in a previous organization, Nora described this interface as follows:

I think another one of the challenges… is, translating science… and kind of being really versed in current science and then bringing it to people and making it really accessible…. I tried to take some of that and actually bring it down to the level where the teachers and the students could actually understand it and use and learn about that research, and, um, just talking to the scientists that work at the lab, that’s one thing that they… feel really, um… kind of lost when they try to do that sort of thing…

She found great satisfaction in working with scientists to “make those connections that make things happen, and how to translate science so that it makes sense for people.”

Amy felt similarly about her role in “communicating information” in a way that people could use. Michelle used similar language in telling me about her work. She described meetings in which “you have lawyers, and scientists, and managers, and users, and all different kinds of citizens and stakeholders all sitting at the table together,” and her efforts to make it “so that you don’t lose messages in different types of translation, so everybody’s at the table and understands what the needs are.” Using her own training to understand the scientist’s findings and recommendations, she helped to translate it “to the
people who are on the ground.” These “people on the ground” often approach the problem from a different perspective—financial or resource—and she said she enjoys it “when you get those groups working together.”

In addition to translating science for those on the ground implementing policy, she also mentioned enjoying translating science for the wider community, explaining:

…you gotta get, get the information out to the public, the citizens, to really explain to them what’s going on and that’s, you know….one of the best parts of [my program] is that we do put out a lot of publications for the public that are, you know, very much in laymen’s terms….I think it’s all about empowering people…

Henry approached the question from the other end, feeling strongly about the need for those managing ENPs to clearly understand the science that they are translating to the community. While he felt that his environmental science training provided him with a greater ability to mediate between science and the community, he stressed the need for a strong grounding in the general sciences, so as to be taken seriously among those creating and disseminating research:

When I’m getting together with [my scientist colleagues]…. I want to talk about new studies and new collaborations, new potential projects, and funding for those projects and on we go, they would never talk with somebody who didn’t have a biological background.

He went on to say that if he was “working under somebody who had an MBA” his organization would be
…cut out of those conversations and those collaborative projects in like a month….and so the key point to me is that if you have an environmental organization or a biological organization, you damn well have to have a biologist or an environmentalist that’s heading that organization, if you don’t they will fail, “Boom!,” that’s it.

Susan does not head her organization, but she felt that the combination of scientific understanding provided by her undergraduate degree and the business understanding provided by her MBA studies have put her in a place to work effectively in translating science to the community and aiding in the implementation of policies that the community will support. Describing her movement into this place, she said:

I realized that through some of my environmental policy coursework I was really interested in the question of “How do you take science and do something with it?” so I was really interested in that kind of applied angle….I was really interested in the kind of human angle of land conservation….so I wanted to work sort of more at the interface of both the, um, human and natural communities.

Learning and Sharing Learning—the Learning Spiral: “It’s a great feeling….we’re a model that people are looking to”

Whether they view it as educating, activating, or translating science, the majority of my participants expressed that they are, like Susan, motivated and invigorated by “taking science and doing something with it.” Feeling so fortunate to have gained a depth of environmental knowledge and an accompanying compulsion to act, for these participants that action often takes the form of educating others. This motivation to share
their learning has occurred throughout their growth as regional ENP professionals and in a variety of contexts. Michelle fondly recalled university outing club events, saying “it was such a great feeling to take kids out into the wilderness for a weekend….and teach them how to take care of themselves”; today she finds great satisfaction in educating others in her field about her programs work that, in turn, focuses on educating the community, telling me what a “great feeling” it is that “we’re a model that people are looking to”:

People will come over from Japan, for example….they said, “We’ve written this management plan with scientists and with managers, and we know you guys have incorporated a lot of the citizens into your management plan, we’re here because we want to talk about how you’ve really empowered citizens to understand their connection to the lake….how do you create those relationships so that people have some, um, real ownership or understanding of their connection and that that they get involved?”

And so the cycle of learning and sharing spirals outward. Carrie described a similar learning spiral; established now as a professional in the field, she has been seeking to help ease others’ entries into it:

…we have this significant internship program, we host work-study students from [local colleges] and, um, you know I feel like as a, now someone who is like a leader or a professional in this field, that’s really important to me is to try and like reach out to students now and help ‘em out….so they have an experience of what the workplace is like, what’s, what’s out there.
In my interview with her, Susan echoed the feelings that Carrie expressed, calling it the “mentorship thing,” and pondering how professionals in the regional ENP field can both seek out learning from more experienced elders and share what they have learned with those entering the field. Time and time again, my participants expressed the power that learning has in sustaining them in both their personal and professional lives. By advancing their own learning and, in turn, sharing it with others, they create an expansive spiral of learning that advances their cause while simultaneously sustaining them in their work.

My participants are a select group, having expressed commitment to working in the regional ENP sector and having evidenced that commitment through sustained work in this area. In examining their own commitment to the regional ENP sector, my participants have pointed to a range of influences. The undergraduate years proved powerful in shaping their identities as environmentalists, in building their commitment to environmental work, and in providing them with skills for success in their current work. Having now been in the field for five years or more, they are familiar with its challenges, yet remain committed to their work even in the face of those challenges, propelled forward by an abiding attachment to place, robust collegial networks, and a passion for learning. Their stories help in the necessary work (Kovan & Dirks, 2003) of painting a more complete picture of a specific and important part of the NPO world. Moreover, these stories help answer the call for a better understanding of moral leadership from the perspectives of the newer, post 60-70s generation of moral leaders (Maldonado, et al., 2003). Their perspectives help us to better understand the processes by which people
move into lives of environmental commitment, the role that the undergraduate experience plays in that process, and the ways through which they currently sustain that commitment. Through these stories, I have gained a clearer and more complete view on the landscape of lives characterized by professional commitment to the regional ENP sector. In the next section I will examine specific aspects of that landscape, using my participants’ stories as a basis for considering avenues for future research and making suggestions about the ways in which undergraduate institutions and the environmental movement can build a cadre of professionals committed to working in the regional ENP sector.
CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion and Recommendations

Shedding Light on the Lives of ENP Professionals

Researchers (e.g., Chawla, 1998a; Winter & Koger, 2004; Zelezny, 1999) have produced a large body of research that looks at how various factors play into the development of environmental sensitivities, attitudes, and behaviors. Much of this research has focused on more general populations. Some, researchers including Chawla (1999), Eigner (2001), and Sohr (2001) have focused their research on volunteer activists, and fewer still (e.g., Brown, 2005; Sward, 1997) have examined the lives of those who pursue environmental work as a part of their profession. Volunteers certainly occupy a vital niche in the environmental-activist landscape (Fox, 1981; Lorenz, 1992), and while being a volunteer environmentalist is beset with its own difficulties (Eigner, 2001; Sohr, 2001), professional work in the environmental world encompasses many of those same difficulties and more: Lorenz (1992) quotes Patricia Honeycutt, a leader from the Izaak Walton League, who said, “Being a volunteer is one of the hardest jobs in the world. Coordinating volunteers is the hardest job in the world” (p. 205). Coordinating volunteers, while raising funds, while conducting research, while building community support, while tending to numerous other tasks, the leaders of the regional environmental nonprofits (ENPs), in Snow’s (1992) words, “have proven that volunteers, working with a small coterie of professional staff, can craft extremely sophisticated and effective public policies without entering into any ‘cult of expertise’” (p. 27). In focusing specifically on regional ENP professionals, my research has helped to clarify the existing “fragmented
and poorly defined” (Kovan & Dirkx, 2003, p. 100) body of research that exists about professionals in nonprofit organizations (NPOs) in general and has shed fresh light on the important, yet underexplored, area of regional ENPs.

In shedding light on what brought them to study environmental issues, on how that course of study prepared them for their work, and on what sustains them in their work today, my research provides perspectives that enhance our understanding of a particular sector of the NPO world, regional ENPs. ENPs make up only 2% of the NPO body, but they wield considerable influence and they address issues that are important to American society (Snow, 1992). Despite their importance, the security of many ENPs is tenuous at best. Roush writes that ENP leaders “are like people in a lifeboat with a few days food and water and no rescue in sight” (Roush, 1992b, p. 26). Add in “underpaid staff, overcommitted boards and limited resources” (Roush, 1992b, p. 26) and you have a work environment that is challenging at best and unsustainable for many. Maintaining leadership over the long haul is vital in developing organizations with the capacity for creating the substantial changes our society needs (Snow, 1992a).

In Chapter Four I explored the stories of a special group of regional ENP professionals—a group that has been able to sustain themselves successfully over time in this challenging work world. Their stories tell of what brought them into the ENP world, of how their training prepared them to persist in it, and of what they do to continue to sustain themselves in their profession. Each of their perspectives is unique, but together they voiced important themes, themes that help us to better understand professional work in the NPO world and, in particular, in the regional ENP sector. In this chapter I will
begin by examining my participants’ transition to commitment as an ENP professionals, then I will look at the role their undergraduate experiences played in developing their commitment to this work, and finally explore those themes most salient in understanding the aspects in their personal and professional lives that appear most vital to their sustenance as regional ENP professionals.

The “Wiring” of Regional ENP Professionals

One area of importance this research explored was that of the transition from adolescence to adult commitment. Understanding this transition is important in building healthy institutions within society (Damon, et al., 2003). In his memoir about his time as the Sierra Club’s youngest president, Adam Werbach (1997) recounts a conversation with an activist named Peter whom he particularly admired: “I asked Peter, ‘Why do people become activists like you?’ His response: ‘Everyone’s got the wiring; in some people it is just more exposed’” (p. 238). For Werbach and others (Damon, et al., 2003; Maldonado, et al., 2003; Parks Daloz, et al., 1996), the question of why people are motivated to enter into a life of commitment is a burning one—it also appears to be a challenging one to put words to as well. Though the stories of participants in this study do not provide an explicit “wiring diagram” so as to develop new generations of regional ENP professionals, through their stories they were able to provide insight into just how particular aspects of their being suited them well to some of the particulars of their work, as well as the overall mission of it.

In describing why they were drawn into ENP, my participants seemed to explain it in terms of what Schmuck & Sheldon (2001) call “motive dispositions”: almost
unconscious drives acquired early in life that influence their behaviors today. Like the participants in Parks Daloz, et al.’s (1996) research, many of whom framed their motivations in terms of the “double negative,” many of my participants expressed that their “wiring” left them pre-disposed to ENP work. That wiring suited them both to particular aspects of the work and that wiring suited them in terms of the mission of the work overall.

Considering the former, Casey described his success in his work as something that is “just sort of my personality,” a “laid-back” personality that allows him to meet the daily emergencies of his work with equilibrium. Henry referred to it as “an attitude” that includes an “idealism [that] isn’t just a function of youth but is going to kind of persist through.” He felt this kind of attitude was necessary in order to be able to withstand the personal and professional financial rigors of ENP work, a feeling Nora echoed in saying people in her field needed “a little bit of a tough skin” and needed to be a “kinda a risk taker” because of financial and other rigors. Carrie felt that the diverse and demanding nature of environmental work fit well with her own disposition, saying, “I mean it’s just my personality that I’m an organizer kind of person.”

Others saw their “wiring” as simply being designed for ENP work. Amy told me that all her life she had “never envisioned myself working for a for-profit agency.” When I asked her why she could not envision that, she said that she just felt that the more competitive and self-serving orientation of the for-profit world did not align with her own, but she could not describe exactly how she came to feel that way. She felt similarly about highly activist-oriented work, saying that in college she came to the realization that
she “didn’t have the personality and skills to be fighting for certain issues.” In his book, *Blessed Unrest*, Hawken (2007) distinguishes between “finite” and “infinite” games:

We play finite games to compete and win. They always have losers and are called business, banking, war, NBA, Wall Street, and politics. We play infinite games to play; they have no losers because the object of the game is to keep playing.

Infinite games pay it forward and fill future coffers. They are called potlatch, family, samba, prayer, culture, tree planting, storytelling, and gospel singing.

For Amy, the finite games of business and politics did not align with her sense of self; her wiring compelled her to seek out the more infinite game of education, where she enjoys “staying neutral on the issues” and passing her learning forward. Seth described his own transition to commitment to ENP work in saying:

I think that sustaining me, um, in the work as sort of an environmental advocate has always been that I’m just real sensitive to what’s going on and I want my life to, to make a difference and I don’t know why that is but, I’m just a caring person…

Yet, again, he could not express how he came to adopt these kinds of attitudes and dispositions. Like Parks Daloz et al.’s (1996) participants, how he felt seemed quite normal to him, and only appeared different when compared to a more general population:

I was always amazed at how many people were kind of checked out you know, a lotta kids that were just like letting this opportunity pass by, so wonder if that’s changed, I don’t know, but I remember feeling kind of like, “Wow, like you can do anything!” but a lot of people just kinda tuned out.
Though the environmentalists in my research could not directly answer the question as to why they had developed into committed ENP professionals, through their stories several defining moments arose that help to explain how they had developed into committed ENP professionals.

Turning Points Toward Commitment—The Undergraduate Experience

In considering the time from youth on through the undergraduate years and into their careers as regional ENP professionals, participants shared a variety of “turning points” or “defining moments,” spanning from a childhood visit to some non-traditional family friends to a college course project speaking out for sexuality rights. On the surface these activities do not seem to share much in common, but they do hold an important structural similarity—both involve encounters with an “other,” a person or group of people that have a different way of life or different set of core beliefs about life. These encounters challenged my participants in two different ways: in some cases the challenge came in expanding their notions of who they could be and what was possible and in other cases the challenge came in forcing them to decide what values they stood for, to more clearly define who they were, and to assert the values they held.

Expanding Horizons: Learning the Lives of “Others”

In terms of encounters with an “other” that challenged my participants to expand their notions of who they could be and what was possible, travel stood out as the primary defining moment, an experience very well typified by Jared. Jared described himself as “definitely more of a techie at the time” he entered college, into “the quick solutions, the glitz and the glamour of technology”—something that changed as he progressed through
his undergraduate years. Through various opportunities for travel he came to feel that technology that he had been brought up with and had been learning about in school was not necessarily the panacea to the world’s problems. Instead he came to feel that

…it’s much more fundamental than that and more, more revolves around an earnest re-evaluation of, like, what’s important…so, I think it took me a while to, to get to the point where……I don’t, I, I don’t see it as a technological solution, I really, I really think it’s fundamentally a cultural…cultural issues that we have to address…

Gradually he began to identify himself as less of a “techie” and more with “people that are taking a step back, to maybe, are taking a step away from technology, that are…reanalyzing, you know, the necessities,” saying that those people “are a little closer to my heart at this point.”

Seth was another participant whose experiences revealed the awaking power of travel. Raised in a more conventional family, his notions of possibility were expanded when they visited some “hippy-dippy” friends of his mother. He said the experience made “a big impression,” because “there was somewhere there was always this like, like stuff in the background about alternative ways of living and knowledge, but I never really fully embraced them”—until that encounter with an “other” opened the door to new possibilities for being. And, even though he makes it clear he is not a “bleeding heart Aquarian,” he says he has tried “to incorporate some of that into myself.”

In the story provided by Jared, travel seems to have planted the seed that opened up new horizons of possibility; whereas, for Seth it seems to have brought to light a seed
that was always somewhere in the background. For these and other participants travel, and its associated encounters with an “other” brought forth fertile ground for them to expand and clarify their ideas of self and to open to new possibilities. In his book, 

*Ecological Identity* (1995), Thomashow writes that the most critical component for training environmental professionals is to foster their “ability and willingness to look deeply within themselves, to understand their motivations and aspirations, to clearly articulate their environmental values, and know how to apply them to professional and personal decisions” (p. xvi). In addition to prompting introspection and self-understanding, as noted in the participants’ stories above, travel also provided encounters with the “other” that prompted participants’ to assert themselves and what they stood for, helping to shape an “ecological identity,” as they consciously grappled with which values they held as important and which they were willing to assert.

Thomashow (1995) suggests that stories of environmental loss often play a large role in building ecological identity; such was the case with Michelle as she began a series of trips to a Caribbean Island as a part of a college research project. Over the course of her visits, she felt a “growing a fondness for that island,” and a commensurate duty to act as she witnessed over time “the reef, it was being stepped on and it was, it was being overrun by different types of sponges and it, it was on the decline.” Though she no longer works with that particular project, the impact of it helped shape her decision to go into the watershed work she now pursues. Traveling to foreign places and witnessing the environmental destruction and accompanying social ills, Jared also felt a growing compulsion to act upon his values:
...I feel obligated, really good people that aren’t blessed the way I am….um, as well as around the world, to have the opportunity to travel, to North Africa, have the opportunity to travel to Central America, South America, and, uh…see on a different level poverty, see on a different level, um, social injustice, and really just feel an obligation to, for service…

In considering the components of ecological identity, Thomashow (1995) identifies what he terms the “political identity” associated with ecological identity. This political identity “is more than just the content of public issues, rather it is the moral deliberation that guides personal and collective action. It is a process of deep introspection, a means of self-discovery through one’s identification with a larger whole: ‘the common domain of human meaning’” (p. 138). In identifying with a larger whole and in feeling an obligation to act for that whole, these participants appear to have discovered formative aspects of their political identity through their experiences of travel.

Romero & Silveri’s (2006) survey of 1059 ESP revealed that study-abroad options were “fairly common” (p. 11); however, their research did not report on what percentage of programs required study-abroad experiences. Based on the power of my participants’ stories, the easy conclusion would be to suggest that programs designed to produce environmental professionals ought to encourage more travel. There are two caveats that must be considered before issuing such a proclamation.

First, as Thomashow notes, “There are so many cultural and historical factors at work [in people’s lives] that we should be wary of drawing causative inferences” (p. 4), an assertion backed up by other researchers as well (e.g., Chawla, 1998a; Chawla,
Travel may spark productive personal development opportunities for some, but it does not necessarily do so for all—and the question as to why this is the case continues to be one of considerable intrigue and complexity for many writing in the field of human development (e.g., Colby & Damon, 1992; Parks Daloz, et al., 1996). While such explorations may indeed be quite complex and would not likely yield quick answers, those considerations should not stand in the way of future research into a question of such importance.

Another problem with issuing a “travel for all!” proclamation is the certain kind of “let them eat cake” aspect to it—financial constraints to travel preclude it as a possibility for many aspiring environmental professionals. Considering her cash-strapped college years, Tara told me:

There wasn’t a lot of time for extra school-type stuff and you know during the summers I had to work so that I could pay for the following semester, so you know there wasn’t I did not have time to, I would’ve loved to go off and do like a study abroad or do other internships in between semesters, that sort of thing but there just wasn’t time for it, I had to work and earn money to pay for school

Given that this is the case for some students, a greater access to scholarships promoting study-abroad semesters, research-related trips, or other travel opportunities would be very beneficial (Hall, et al., 2005), as they were in Henry’s case. Many of his cash-strapped college friends

…would take summers off and they would go and work places where they could make a lot of money really fast, you know, there’s a local brewery and guys like
went in and they worked, they would work like double shifts and they would come out with like buckets full of, of money.

Henry, on the other hand, said he was “fortunate because I had some small scholarships that just kind of paid for a stipend for me,” so that he was able to travel with a professor to work with wolves in Canada’s Algonquin Park during the summer. Considering the powerful influences that these travel experiences had on my participants, colleges and organizations seeking to groom future generations of environmental professionals would do well to consider creating wider opportunities for students of all economic backgrounds to integrate travel into their educational experiences.

Encountering Others Nearby: The Value of Class Projects and Field Learning

Fortunately, the experiences of my participants also allude to ways in which encounters with an “other” can be experienced without straying more than a few miles off campus and often even within its walls. Hands-on class projects in the local community provided several of my participants with powerful encounters with an “other.” In Chapter Four, Jared fondly recounted the “pretty profound, very thoughtful” course he had had that included “some projects and service-oriented work,” including participation in protests in support of an amendment to the state constitution to prohibit any laws that would provide relief for discrimination against homosexuals. Going to protests, he encountered the “other,” and in the face of that difference he was able to more clearly discern his own identity and the values for which he stood:

[You’re] at a march an’ they’re yellin’ at you...you know “faggot,” oh, you know, it’s like bouncin’ off you to a degree, you have a degree of distance, but you still
have to maintain, like the motivation to, to believe this is right...so, to a degree
you receive the same abuse, or like, ahh...you know the societal, ah, you know it
raises a quotient of fear in you as a person, and then to still be able to participate
because you know it’s right, was...was a...very powerful to a degree...

These experiences built within him the courage to express who he was becoming and
what he stood for; and though over time his interests have centered more on the
environment, he feels that those experiences still are a part of him, making him “less
afraid” when it comes to “address issues of Wal-Mart or corporatization in America.”
Thomashow (1995) writes that political identity work involves people “reconceptualizing
the role of power and controversy in their lives...[and]...how issues of authority, conflict,
and consensus are intrinsic to their sense of self and define their participation in social
systems” (p. 105); it is clear that Jared’s early protest experiences remain within him as a
part of his political identity in changing his perceptions about standing for his beliefs in
the face of public challenges to them. Explorations of political identity were also evident
in Henry’s account of a particularly memorable group project. He told me:

I remember doing a project on, there’s a neighborhood school of mine and there
was, there was some debate about whether or not, because of budget cuts, they
were going to um close the school or not, and what we, we received training in
environmental studies in working with small groups, in small groups of people on
a joint project and going and interviewing different folks and determining who
were the actors and what was the situation, and doing these types of things, and I
found that really valuable.
Learning about the issues on the ground and speaking to the various stakeholders, both those in and out of power, he learned about the “role of power and controversy” in his life that Thomashow (1995, p. 105) speaks about, and gained a clearer perspective on where he wished to act within that power structure. Susan also found a greater understanding of how she wished to operate within the power structure by way of a class project in a state park. That project spurred her interest in the human angle of land conservation and forced her to grapple with the question “Why protect the environment?”, during which process she said:

I realized that in my own mind sort of all the arguments I was articulating, it all came back to, we need protect the environment because that’s ultimately um what’s gonna help us as a human species, so I wanted to work sort of more at the interface of both the, um, human and natural communities…

Contrasting his experiences his environmental studies major versus those in his zoology studies, Henry summarized that “it created friendships there and an environmental studies identity that I didn’t get in zoology.” The transformative power of the experiences these participants shared suggests that class projects figured powerfully into their construction of an identity as an environmentalist and, ultimately, as an environmental professional.

College faculty would do well to consider this in designing their course curriculum. However, for faculty there is always the question of how to present a course that opens horizons while not eliciting charges of “brainwashing” students (Crowfoot, 1993; Strauss, 1999). Bigelow (1997) provides an account from his experiences as a high school teacher in which a student, Daneeka protested a classroom project oriented toward
encouraging Nike to adopt more socially-just labor practices. From personal experience I can say that similar reactions occur in the college context as well, as evidenced by this vignette drawn from a paper I had written earlier in my doctoral coursework, discussing how to address sustainability issues in college curricula:

Last year, as a part of my Leadership Theory and Practice course, students gained leadership practice by re-implementing the campus’s Earth Day celebrations (which had waned over the years) for their group project. Sensitive to the various political leanings and personal opinions of my students, early on in the project I feel like I made a very clear attempt to explain that any views were acceptable, provided they brought focus to Earth-related events: if someone wished to invite in a “nuclear as alternative energy” speaker that was acceptable, if someone wished to invite in someone to speak on the environmental benefits of hunting and trapping, that was acceptable. Feeling that people could have learned from such dissenting voices, I was saddened to see none of these types of events planned. Nonetheless, the event was great success, bringing in speakers on global warming, slam poets talking about social and ecological justice, a tofu-tasting booth, and hosting a variety of other events. Collecting anonymous feedback from students at the end of the project, most reflected enthusiasm about the event, pride in their roles in it, and satisfaction with the leadership lessons gleaned. However, I do remember one scathing comment: “I didn’t pay to come to college to be brainwashed.”

As this evidence suggests, I cannot offer fool-proof advice on the topic of how to
implement class projects that will be appreciated by all students. It is a tricky topic to negotiate, as some of the comments of my participants attest. My participants were a generally environmentally active group during college, but even among this group there were some expressions of appreciation for courses that did not, in Seth’s words, “ham it up” on the environmental activism.

In the same breath that Jared recounted the faculty member who had designed the class project that he says was one of the “fundamental stages of the, of my growth as an activist,” he also mentioned taking a course with a “brainy, faculty guy that was, you know, high, on his way up the, the climate change loop [who] presented the facts and we could do whatever the heck we wanted to with ‘em.” Seth went even further, specifically stating that his “program really didn’t uh, advocate very much on the political activist side of things” and he was happy with that because “there was enough in the sort of private sector of people getting involved and the clubs of getting involved, sort of the emergency response, crisis kind of um, standard activist kind of side of things.” He appreciated having faculty who “didn’t bother to…ham it up on that stuff,” feeling that it “was really powerful role modeling” that helped him to understand that “there’s multiple ways to embrace you know seeking, seeking a difference.”

Considering both the negative and positive responses that I have experienced in my own curriculum experiments and the varying reactions of even this committed group of environmentalists to inserting an “activist edge” into curriculum by way of class projects, perhaps it comes down to the particular setting. If students find themselves at a school that does not have a particularly strong environmental community then they may
well appreciate a curriculum that more specifically encourages them to explore their political identity as environmentalists. However, if they attend a school with a thriving activist culture, then the faculty may find it more useful to direct the curriculum in ways that complement that culture, rather than simply building upon it. Listening to the various stories that have been told to me about participants’ undergraduate experiences, I feel that the ideas they are expressing to me cannot be encapsulated in “cookbook” solutions like “add more class projects,” but that it is more a matter of ensuring that the undergraduate experience includes rich and varied opportunities for establishing and building “affiliational bonds” that allow participants to find support in a network of people with shared environmental concern, complementing their “learning the problem” with opportunities to develop and express their environmental identities through shared action.

*Extracurricular Connections: Building Affiliational Bonds*

Horton (2006) noted that in Alex de Tocqueville’s pivotal work *Democracy in America*, de Tocqueville felt that a virtuous citizenry was best created through voluntary associations; building on this notion, Horton suggests that “the virtues of environmental citizenship are perhaps best built through voluntary association in environmental groups, campaigns, and organizations” (p. 129). Though this study concerns environmental professionals rather than an environmental citizenry, my participants’ stories indicate the power that voluntary associations established within their college communities had in helping them to establish themselves as environmentalists. By providing a fertile seedbed upon which they could spread roots as environmentalists, their college years...
provided them with personal and professional skills that have been in important in building their capacities to sustain themselves as regional ENP professionals.

Henry felt a profound change from his high school environment when he entered into a program where students shared a similar core set of interests and values. Describing the alienation he felt as a high school student interested in things environmental, and his transition to college, Henry remembers:

…that all changed when I got into university, suddenly I was doin’ stuff that I was really interested in and I was, and I was surrounded by people who felt more or less the same way that I did, there were a few less of, there were fewer of those people who kind of were, um…I don’t know, you know, not exactly shallow but didn’t share your, your values and things and suddenly it was like I’d found my people, you know, when I got into there, so that was great.

While academic programs provided an affiliational home for Henry and others, the extracurricular context also played a valuable role in providing opportunities for participants to form relationships with similar others and to build identities as environmentalists.

Horton (2006) writes that, “Would-be green activists must enter and negotiate an initially strange cultural world…through which they learn gradually how to act, developing competence in culturally specific behaviors and understandings” (p.133). He highlights the importance of “networks” (social connections by way of workshops, gatherings, etc) and the “spaces” within which these networks can be built. Considering her own networks and spaces during college, Carrie remembered in particular the
environmental-themed house that she lived in her sophomore and senior years. This house provided her and a “core kind of group of people that had similar interests” with a place to share interests, concerns, and support. In this shared housing she and others practiced consensus decision-making processes and other types of “green behaviors” that helped them to establish identities as environmentalists (Horton, 2006) and helped to reinforce the affective component of activism that advances commitment (Nepstad, 2004). In our interview, Michelle also mentioned the value of living in environmentally-themed housing and Seth remembered the experience as being “pretty formative.”

Student clubs and organizations were another venue through which Seth and others were able to develop strong affiliational bonds and networks of support in establishing themselves as environmentalists and, ultimately, as environmental professionals. Coincidentally referencing de Tocqueville in discussing the value of these voluntary associations, he said, “I’m like a Toquevillian joiner and I am the kinda guy that likes to be a part of stuff and so, when I was at [name of university]… I joined every club you can think of related to the environment.” Crowfoot (1992) points out that, “Often preparation for leadership includes experiences and responsibilities that have nothing to do with academics or natural resource and environmental issues” and suggests that participation in campus community activities that “challenge the person and assist him or her in developing social confidence” (p. 244) is what is really important, as these experiences help them to better know themselves and their limitations, which he asserts is a key part of effective environmental leadership. Such was the case with Amy. Throughout college she was heavily involved with the new student orientation program
and though the program had little directly to do with the environment, she found the support of similar others and the learning they shared as they met and overcame organizational obstacles to be important in building her own identity as a capable professional. And, indeed, even informal spaces were fertile places for networks to form. Recollecting the transformation that brought him to where he is today, Jared remembered that “from classrooms to...uh...keg parties to the bars to the...grocery store, to the park, to the bike ride with other people, to the hikes” there were “a lot of conversations that happen[ed] throughout time that it was just like, ‘OK, this is the progression.’”

This notion of college being an important place for students to find networks of support to aid them in establishing their ecological identities did not emerge in my mind until I was coding the data, but in fact, I had a related experience about halfway through the series of my interviews. While working on my field logs in a Burlington café, I made the following entry:

Interestingly, as I sit here writing this, I am beside a table of UVM students who are Environmental Science majors. For the last hour or so they’ve been hashing through the merits of cover crops and no-till farming for a paper they’re preparing. Now the conversation has shifted to going back home at Thanksgiving. They’re expressing a palpable degree of alienation from the folks back home, both family and friends. I feel that in coming to the university and finding others like them, they’ve found a home. At home they were different, now going back home, they express feeling totally detached, surrounded by people now so different from their present community.
In the part of my log after this passage, I proceed to say that these kinds of bonds did not seem to be something that my participants stressed in our conversations; however, as I began to code data, it became clear to me that this was an area of importance for my participants when considering their undergraduate experience.

Whether it occurred through meeting others who had elected a similar academic track, through shared living situations, or through simply, as Jared put it “being young and vocal and, and socializing and so forth,” my participants suggested that their college environments presented them with the “networks” and “spaces” that Horton (2006) points to as critical in developing environmental activist identities. These environments presented them with fertile soil in which to “link their ecological worldview to their personal identity” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 6). Given that even among my participant group of regional ENP professionals there were a wide variety of ways in which affiliational bonds were established and nurtured, it would be rash to suggest that there is any one thing that colleges seeking to develop environmental professionals should do; but it is surely safe to suggest that these colleges will best create a healthy climate for nurturing future environmental professionals by providing networks and spaces for developing environmentalist identities in both the academic and extracurricular contexts.

Transitioning to Professional Commitment—Entering and Staying In Regional ENPs

Each movement forward in life is the confluence of myriad winds, tides, and currents, such that it is impossible to discern distinctly the precise influence of each—or even where one movement ends and another begins. My participant’s academic and extracurricular undergraduate experiences provided powerful opportunities to develop as
environmentalists and as environmental professionals. At the same time, those experiences also built within them capacities for sustaining themselves as environmental professionals over the long haul. In the next section, I begin by examining “the power of place”—an aspect that was developed for many of my participants as undergraduates and an aspect that sustains all of my participants in their professional lives. Then I examine concerns more specific to my participants’ lives as ENP professionals: financial challenges, personal ramifications, and career considerations. I go on to examine the powerful role that learning plays in the lives of the environmental professionals in my study and I conclude with some comments about the homogeneity of these environmental professionals and the need to diversify the ESP student body and the ENP professional corps.

The Power of Place: A Primary Source of Sustenance

Research suggests that positive experiences in natural environments are important in the formation of environmental attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles (Chawla, 1998). Investigating the roots of practical concern for the environment, Palmer (1993) found early experiences with outdoor activities, wilderness, and solitude to be among the biggest influences, as did Chawla (1999), in an investigation into U.S. and Norwegian environmentalists. Focusing specifically on the staff of national conservation organizations, Tanner (1980) found frequent early contact with natural areas to be the primary factor in motivating these people to go into conservation work. While this research points to the importance of environmental contact in developing positive environmental attitudes, the stories of my participants express the importance of
environmental contact and connection in sustaining them as environmental professionals. Moreover, for these regional ENP professionals, it was a connection to a certain place, perhaps not coincidentally, the place in which they lived and worked (and for several, the place they went to college) that provided that sustenance.

Carrie graduated from college knowing she wanted to work in New England, "because I grew up in New England"; Michelle grew up in the Mid-Atlantic, went to a different region for her undergraduate years, fell in love with it and stayed; Jared started in the South, went out West to finish his undergraduate studies, and the set down his roots in the Northeast, where his family had a vacation home. Regardless of the events leading up to their eventual choice of location, my participants were in that location for a reason: it felt like their place. Embedding the meaning he finds in his vocation within the context of the place that this work happens, Seth said:

I have more of a propensity to want to stick around than if I did the exact same job for the same type of organization in Oregon, you know, I mean it might be there would always something else you know like until you really belong.

A strong theme in my research was that the meaning of the work and the importance of the place intertwine. My participants have chosen to work in a particular place because that is the place they want to be and because that is the place they find the most meaning in protecting.

The scale of place varied for my participants. Casey expressed his feelings about place in terms of the state he grew up in, drinking water straight from the brook on childhood bike rides; whereas, today he said, "I see on my drive home people fishing out
of the river and I know that there’s mercury in those fish.” For Jared, who has put the past ten years toward developing the environmental education center he directs, that place is much closer. During our interview he expressed with wonder the variables involved in learning about a place even as specific as a single farm:

> Five year cycles, lifetimes in one place, in [this township]….whether you choose to live down in the valley or up here in the mountains, there’s about five miles difference…radically different climates, radically, you know, to, to spend a lifetime in either one of these environments within five miles of another…that’d be a tremendous amount of knowledge to be gained.

Regardless of the scale of place they used in describing their affections, place provided vital sustenance to my participant.

As I saw this theme emerge, my first reaction was “well, of course”—my participants are regional ENP professionals, so it might seem obvious to suppose that they should feel emotionally close to the place they are working to protect. But if a research were to apply that line of reasoning to, for example, those in the sales professions s/he might imagine that a refrigerator salesman was passionate about refrigerators, or perhaps loved the cold, or at least was a big fan of ice cream—none of which is necessarily, or even often, the case. Continuing with this analogy, aside from pay, the salesman may be selling this particular product because he enjoys his sales team or the clients with which he deals. Hypothetically, the same could be true for most regional ENP professionals—their attraction to their job might have little to do with the particular place they are conserving and might have more to do with the dynamics of
small organizations or the frequent opportunities for community contact that such jobs offer, or any number of other reasons. While my different participants certainly mentioned things like staff, community, diverse roles and other aspects of their work as being important in sustaining them, across the board my participants noted place as being an important source of sustenance, and for several it was mentioned as central. Indeed, as Carrie said, “more important to me than like any particular career path is finding a place where I want to live and making connections in the community and not just being like, ‘Oh, I’m going to move to San Diego, ‘cause there’s something cool going on over there.’” Unlike ENP professionals working in larger, national and international organizations, these ENP professionals are not just working to protect some place—they are working to protect their place. Melding the environmental work they feel so strongly about with a place to which they so closely identify, these regional ENP professionals’ work has taken on added personal meaning.

Rehm (1990) discusses vocation in terms of the “inner relations of the self and the personal project of work” (p. 124). For my participants, those “inner relations” have come to include place. Seth gained his relationship with place having grown up there; now he sees himself, the place, and its inhabitants merging into the “texture of the story that I’m in.” For Amy, it was an “immediate affinity” for a lake in Asia that she lived alongside as an exchange student in high school. That powerful period in her life served to ground her in her current place on the shores of a large lake in the American West, where she is “getting involved in the community” and feeling more and more at home.
Michelle’s avid participation in her university’s outing club gave her ample opportunities to explore the region’s natural wonders.

For these participants and others, personal identity and place have entwined. Coming to know the places they are living, they have come to identify a part of who they are with those places. As Michelle noted:

…if you have a connection with the land, whether you know you ski in the mountains or you canoe in the rivers or you watch whatever types of birds come to your birdfeeder every morning, if you have a connection with the place I think that’ll fuel your passion and if you don’t I think this would be a much more transient job…

Identifying so strongly with the place they are working to protect, sustaining the place and sustaining the self become entwined.

Malikow (2007) builds upon Rehm’s (1990) depiction of vocation in discussing the idea of a “calling.” Malikow asserts that, “With a calling comes the experience of fulfillment owing to engagement in personally meaningful and socially useful activity” (p. 120); in doing so, she links personal and social values together in work. While some of my participants’ expressions about place focused solely on natural environments, several others clearly expressed that their connections with the place integrally included the human inhabitants. Discussing an on-going legal battle to get a company to clean up the mercury it had dumped into a nearby river, Casey alluded to this connection between himself, his work, the place, and its people: “I see on my drive home people fishing out of the river and I know that there’s mercury in those fish and, um, you know that there
are certainly low-income people in [my state] that, um, need those fish to make it through the year.” Henry described similar connections between work, place, and people in describing his rescue of distressed wildlife: “You think that you’re doin’ good work and the gentleman that you’re in touch with is always appreciative and things….you can gain energy from that, because you realize “Wow, these people care!” Contrast this kind of experience with, say, an AIDS drug researcher in an NPO who has no daily contact with those benefitting from her work or with the director of a rainforest protection ENP who only visits the rainforest once a year, and it is easy to imagine how this kind of daily, direct contact with the people of the place could provide sustenance in ways that many other kinds of NPO and ENP work might not. Daily experiencing the place they identify with, and toward which their work is directed toward, along with experiencing the social value of their work, they are in a better position to experience it as a calling. The meaning of the work and the importance of the place intertwine. This, at least in part, may explain why the regional ENP professionals who were are part of this study did not seem to express the kind of despair, alienation, or burnout that the literature suggests is found among others working in the environmental world—a point I will address at the close of this chapter.

The power that place has in sustaining these regional ENP professionals provides a basis for making several suggestions regarding the undergraduate ESP experience. Many of the participants in this study did not live in the state within which they now work until they lived there as undergraduates. Living there as undergraduates, they came to know the place through unstructured time outdoors, structured outing programs, and
field work in academic courses. Considering the rich soil her undergraduate experience provided for laying down the roots of place, Michelle had this to say:

I wouldn’t have the same connection if I was working in the Southwest somewhere, let’s say, or didn’t have the background of being in school here and exploring the mountains and rivers and things, um, I really think that the program at [my school] was very much centered around sense of place, whether it was an environmental art class or a natural history class….you begin to really understand what went on here and then you’re like “I really want to protect it, now I get it!”

Um, other places I don’t think I might have that same strong connection…

Romero & Silveri’s (2006) study note that the dispersion of ESP programs varies widely, from thirty programs per million inhabitants in Vermont to zero in Idaho. Given the ties that I found expressed by my participants between coming to know a place during one’s undergraduate years and choosing to remain there for one’s ENP career, it is reasonable to suggest that ENP organizations (regional, national, and international) wishing to increase their depth of choices in applicants for positions within their organizations would do well to lobby for increased support for ESPs in the colleges and universities of the particular state(s) in which their office(s) were located. Considering the link between place of study and place of eventual ENP work evidenced in my participants, I can imagine that if ENPs were to lobby for this kind of increased ESP representation, they would reap the benefits in terms of a larger pool of talent from which to draw, and hence, a greater pool of talent within their organizations. Additionally, these same considerations could hold weight for national ENP seeking to advance policies
within particular states; by building a particular state’s pool of individuals ready to commit themselves to staying in and preserving the resources of that state, national ENPs would go a long way toward advancing their own particular campaigns related to that state.

However, it is important to also realize that simply offering an ESP at a university is not enough to ensure that a sense of place will take root in its students. The stories my participants told me indicate that simply being in a particular place for four years is not enough to engender that development: academic and extracurricular experiences that included immersion in the natural world were integral to the process, a finding in line with existing research (Zelezny, 1999). Through formal avenues such as field-based research projects and collegiate outing clubs and through simply providing students with easy access to natural areas, the university years can provide opportunities to experience the surrounding region and develop a sense of place that serves as a seedbed that motivates young environmental professionals to set their roots in and remain. This should be noted by ENPs and other factions within any particular state wishing to increase the capacity of the environmental organizations within that state; they would do well to both encourage the establishment of ESP within their state’s higher education institutions and to ensure that those programs include ample opportunities for learning about and connecting with the natural areas within that specific state.

That place figured heavily into my participants’ choices for a profession and for a particular job should also be noted by those considering future research in the connection between place and profession among those in environmental work. There is a great deal
of research and writing that attest to the formative power of childhood contact with natural places (e.g., Chawla, 1999; Louv, 2005; Neilson, 2006; Palmer, 1993; Tanner, 1980) and some literature examines the formative power of contact with particular places (e.g., Thomashow, 1995). Additionally, looking at the autobiographies of noteworthy environmentalists indicates the continuing power of place in sustaining these environmental activists and professionals (e.g., Brower, 2000; Maathai, 2007; Pezeshki, 1998), but I found no research that focused specifically how ESP students create bonds with their particular undergraduate places, and on how those bonds with place function in sustaining them as ENP professionals (and in particular regional ENP professionals) over the long haul. Research into these areas would provide regional ENP organizations and ESP programs with ideas for building the quality of their regions’ ENP professional staff and the capacity of those organizations to implement positive environmental change within their regions.

*Dealing with the Bottom Line: Finances and the Regional ENP Professional*

During the process of writing up my findings, deep into considerations about both the power of place and the financial challenges faced by regional ENP professionals, I had a telling encounter with a woman sitting near me at a local café. Though foreign born, for the past several years, she had lived in a small community about an hour from Burlington. For the first few of those years, she had worked as the director of a local watershed organization. Over time, she told me that place became the “center of my world.” However, she realized that she had hit “an economic glass ceiling” doing her current work, and while she was willing to scrape by and scrimp in the beginning, she
realized that she would eventually need to either leave the place she loved or she would need to leave the regional ENP work she was doing... she now commutes regularly to Burlington to pursue a degree in the health field.

As Henry said, when discussing the challenges regional ENP professionals face in continuing forward with their work, “sooner or later we have to hit on the financial aspects.” Snow’s (1992) survey of ENP professionals concluded that their pay was substantially lower than their counterparts working in governmental or for-profit positions. No research has focused specifically on the pay of regional ENP professionals, but it is reasonable to assume that their situation is at best the same, and more than likely worse—a point Henry drives home when he compares his community’s priorities in times of budget tightening: “When it comes right down to it, people are going to be making these judgments, you know, ‘Hey, kids or trees, kids or wildlife, kids or the environment?’ and the kids are gonna win.” For Henry, and presumably other regional ENP leaders, these problems are compounded by the fact that many of the major charitable grant-making foundations in his state are “very heavily weighted toward the social side.”

It would be a rather vacuous suggestion to recommend that foundations, communities, and individuals provide regional ENPs with greater financial support—people generally understand that this would be a positive thing to do. People understand this, but in a world of limited financial resources, they make choices to put their money toward other kinds of work. The key then is to make the value of environmental work
more relevant to local people and to make it apparent to people in the community how the
issues they are concerned with are connected to the area’s environment (Foster, 1993).

Authors Nordhaus & Shellenberger (2007) make this point (and a variety of other
more controversial ones) in their book *Breakthrough: From the Death of
Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility*, and author-environmentalist Paul
Hawken’s (2007) research into the range of ENPs in existence reveals that ENPs are
indeed increasingly aware of the need to connect their work with other issues of concern
in the global community as well as local communities, and that attempts to widen the
scope of environmentalism appear to be taking root. Many of my participants indicated
that they were aware of this need, as evidenced by Susan’s questions:

How can we make our land protection work more relevant to the communities,
um, where we do it? How can those communities benefit more from our work?
How can they know more about our work? And how can we, um, conduct that
work, whether it’s the kind of properties we’re buying, or the way we’re
stewarding them, um, so that there’s more connection to local communities?

Others, like Casey, have begun to answer those questions, linking environmental
concerns to public health and economic injustice, in bringing to light the mercury
poisoning going on in rivers where many locals are forced to fish so as to supplement
their meager food budgets. As regional ENPs advance these kinds of approaches, I am
hopeful that one outcome will be that regional ENP professionals are better compensated
for their work; with that in mind, I believe that these regional ENPs—as well as their
organizational networks—would do well to continue in focusing substantial effort on
making the connections between the environmental work they are advancing and the issues of concern to their communities more transparent.

*The Personal Side of Being a Regional ENP Professional: Relationships and Family*

Though the romantic relationships and family situations of my participants were not areas I intended to explore during our interviews, in the course of those interviews each participant chose to position themselves in relation to their family of choice and families of origin. Of my ten participants, eight are unmarried (one divorced), and only two are married and have children. Marriage is a social convention that is undesirable to some couples and unavailable to others, so the fact that eight are not married could just be interpreted as an outgrowth of those factors, but in the course of my interviews with these participants, I feel they shared a fair bit about their personal lives and none of the eight unmarried people mentioned living with or even sharing time with a significant other, leaving me fairly sure that most if not all are not in long-term relationships. Admittedly, even among couples that intend to marry, college-educated people are getting married later in life than in previous generations. One corollary to that is that they also tend to have children later in life. My participants were, on average, in their early 30s, so the absence of committed relationships and children may just be a side-effect of those dynamics—but this information could be telling in many important ways as well, and it suggests some areas for future research.

The first consideration goes back to finances. The seven participants without children are staying afloat financially right now, but many mentioned the financial strain. Do some people leave their work in the regional ENP sector when they decide to take on
the added financial burdens of child-rearing? Conversely, do some people modify their personal priorities regarding childrearing so as to continue working in the regional ENP sector? Our society places a large emphasis on childrearing and it is a cherished life goal for many individuals, so if people felt they had to choose between staying in the regional ENP sector and raising a family, that would be important to know.

Related to this, some of the evidence from my interviews indicates that though the finances of such work may put a strain on them, the relatively informal scheduling of these smaller organizations made them attractive, family-friendly places. Despite the time demands of his work, Casey found that the flexibility it allows balances things out and made things easier when starting his family:

We still work extremely hard and we still get, you know, burnt-out and, you know, at times, but I think, uh, I was able to go away and have a baby and leave for six weeks and, you know, still keep in touch but not do a lot of work.

Contrasting her time with a state agency with her current work, Tara told me

It was very restrictive in a lot of ways where as you know my life here is a lot more flexible, a lot more, um conducive to having a family and having a life….so for me it’s a good fit, I’m a mom and it makes it easier for me.

So, despite the financial constraints of regional ENP work, it may be that the flexible nature of the organizations (Foster, 1993) actually make them attractive places to work and enhances the sustainability of professionals in the regional ENP field who have children. And in the case of two-earner households where expenses are shared (thereby lessening the financial burden) the flexibility of the work may actually make it an
attractive option for one wage-earner—particularly if the other person is garnering a higher wage. Research focusing on ENP professionals in committed relationships that include children that explored how ENP work supported or worked against a healthy family life could shed light on these topics—and again, given the value most people place on being in committed relationships that include children, this is an important dynamic to understand if we hope to retain professionals in the ENP field.

The flip side to the flexibility in these organizations is that they also tend to be unstable (Snow, 1992). Perhaps some of my participants feel that their professions are too tumultuous to consider committing to a lifelong relationship and to having children. Feeling forced to choose between personal and professional commitments is not a recipe for sustainability within a profession, so if this were the case it would be important to know and to address. Research that focuses on the personal and professional choices of mid-life ENP professionals who are not in lifelong relationships, and on those that are in lifelong relationships but do not have children could shed valuable light on this topic. Additionally, this type of research could also shed light on a final possibility—perhaps among ENP professionals there are certain values they hold (e.g., a prioritization of independence or a feeling that having children is not environmentally-responsible) that direct them toward childlessness.

In summary, while my data is certainly not conclusive, it does raise some interesting questions about the personal lives of ENP professionals. A quantitative study to determine whether my data is reflective of a wider trend would be a useful first step. If there did appear to be a wider trend, then qualitative research exploring the processes
behind that trend would be integral to better understanding the dynamics of the ENP profession.

The Long View: Career Trajectory

For regional ENP professionals, the financial hardships brought on by low salaries is a major challenge, and yet only one of my participants (Carrie) mentioned the potential for leaving the regional ENP sector in the future, and for her that consideration did not directly concern finances—it had to do with career trajectory. Tilt (1993) described the environmental work world as one “where the career path is meandering and often without signposts” (p. xi). Whelan (2000) suggests that in activist organizations there is “little interest in replicating within their organizations the sort of human resource arrangements typical of the public and industry sectors,” feeling that “the master's house will never be destroyed with the master's tools” (Introduction, para. 8). Perhaps because the organizations my participants worked for would qualify as more “mainstream” than “activist,” that sentiment did not seem to be apparent, as evidenced by Susan’s comment:

…it’s not exactly clear….you know, what are the key roles and what are the key leadership roles, I mean, yeah, there’s obviously executive directors at all these organizations, but what are some of the other key roles that these organizations really need? Chief operating officers, chief financial officers, so I think that’s part of the challenge, that kind of organizational structure, you know, the field as a whole hasn’t thought it through a lot…

My participants did not seem averse to standard organizational structures; the primary problem that many expressed was that they did not see many opportunities for continued
advancement within the structure of their current organizations. Although only in their late twenties to early forties, six of my ten participants already occupied the top position within their organizations. The first question this raises is “Why are there no people in their forties to sixties at the helms of these regional ENPs?,” followed by “Will these people still be working in regional ENPs ten or twenty years from now?” Carrie’s answer to the second question was:

At this point I’m thinking, I could, you know there are other nonprofits that I could, would be interested in running, or there are business opportunities that are coming out of the green building world that are interesting to me to, so there are a variety of different things, different possibilities out there.

Snow (1992) posits that stable organizations are more able to influence public decisions over the long haul, and concludes that deliberate efforts should be made to keep leaders in the organization or at least in the movement. How can regional ENPs do this? These organizations are almost by definition small, so there is only so much room for advancement. While the problem does seem somewhat intractable, my participants expressed an avid love for learning that may provide some solutions.

*The Potency of Learning: Filling in the Financial Gap*

Considering Carrie’s comments about potentially moving on to another organization, Snow (1992a) sounds a note of caution: “It is not uncommon to find NGO staff leaders who have worked for three or more environmental nonprofits, moving along just ahead of complete and final burnout by staying with one organization for no more than three or four years” (p. 170). Carrie does not appear to be on the brink of burnout,
but it does feel she is cresting the learning curve at her current organization, and for her and my other participants, learning is a potent force in continued job satisfaction. Literature on the topic suggests that in order to retain their executive-level staff, NPOs should work to ensure their staff have ample opportunities for professional growth (Kovan & Dirks, 2003), and the stories of my participants indicate that this is certainly true in regional ENPs as well.

Whelan (2000) suggests that many environmental activists feel that putting time toward professional development takes them away from more important tasks directly related to advancing environmental issues, and hence, it is often overlooked. Additionally, he noted a “very strong culture of individualism” (Introduction, para. 12), where they feel “tough enough” to get by without support networks to sustain their activism. The stories of my participants suggest differently. Early in their development as environmentalists, my participants felt the call to action that came in “learning the problems.” Through academic courses that included field-based class projects and research and through extracurricular involvement in student organizations, they felt the empowerment that comes in responding to a problem in a constructive manner (Eigner, 2001; Sohr, 2001). Having felt the value and power of learning early in their own development as environmentalists, they see continued learning as a vital part of their person, and they see that learning as being something that happens in community.

Far from seeing themselves as “rugged enviro-individualists,” my participants have developed strong networks of people around them, both in and out of the workplace. Sometimes these networks are sources for creative inspiration and sounding boards for
ideas. Carrie laughed as she told me about conversations with colleagues she has, in which they discuss

“…really mundane things, but like, you know, ‘Here’s how they do their personnel policy, we’re gonna, let’s do, let’s try that as a model’…. for me, I’m very interested in that and how that works and so, looking at how other organizations function and the particular interests of mine and trying to bring it back to the work that I’m doing…

Though she self-consciously dismisses such exchanges as “mundane,” it is clear that these episodes provide fuel for her work, allowing her to continue forward on her own learning trajectory. Through the sharing of ideas, they are able to reaffirm their own and others’ commitments to the value of the work they are doing. Describing that sharing of support that arises concurrently with the sharing of ideas, Michelle says, “Part of that is the relationships that you create and the connections you make, I think, um, knowing different people who are all facing these similar challenges,” and she depicts just such a concurrent sharing of ideas and support in describing

…this dialogue at the Basin Program about rapid response management and how they can adopt that concept maybe to the rest of their state or what have you, but really just connecting with those people and having that time to say ‘You know this can really not be fun sometimes and really challenging.’

As the quotes above suggest, through sharing both ideas and support, these collegial networks become learning communities, and that sense of community is a powerful source for sustenance in their lives. But, there also appears to be another deep role that
learning plays in sustaining my participants. As McDonald (2002) and Kovan & Dirkx (2003) suggest, these participants lives have been touched by the transformative power of learning, and now touched, they seek to continue and deepen the learning. Schmuck & Sheldon (2001) note the link between the pursuit of goals for their intrinsic rewards and psychological well-being and this appears to be the case for these participants—learning provides both motivation and reward in the work they do. As Casey told me when discussing his satisfaction with his job: “I’m still motivated, like there’s a lot more I can learn.”

Kovan & Dirkx (2003, p. 112) suggest that the environmental professionals that they studied coped during “dark moments” in their lives by looking for outside learning opportunities. Their research does not suggest that a precursor to these “dark moments” might be the diminishment of learning within their work, but the stories of my participants suggest that they understand the role that learning plays in their personal well-being and when they feel the learning is diminishing in their work, they have actively sought ways to continue along the learning curve, keeping such dark moments at bay. Sometimes that learning can be found within the organization, as Carrie explains:

One of my challenges has been trying to feel like I’ve been continuing to learn things and so, I felt like the finance end was something I had an inclination toward, but I didn’t really know anything about it, um, was not part of my undergraduate experience, um, and so it’s been good, ‘cause I feel like I’m still learning.
Others have used formal continuing education to both build their learning about organizational management and to fill in the gaps when they felt the learning curve in their work diminishing. Graduate school provided an immediate means for many to both build their organizational management skills and to feed their hunger to learn; seven of the ten participants earned their master’s degrees and all did so in their twenties. Now back in the day-to-day world of regional ENP work—and often now at a executive managerial level—many have sought to continue their learning via formal professional development programs, such as the Environmental Leadership Program and the Rockwood Leadership Program.

Early on in his work as an environmental community organizer Casey participated in trainings with one such program, an experience he found “really helpful in the practical work of what takes to organize.” Later, he also participated in another. Evolving as a leader, Casey enjoyed the opportunity for practicing various leadership skills and “thinking through that you’re a leader and people see you as a leader and, you know, things that you do or how you act influences others, that type of just like mentality, you know, things that you don’t necessarily always think about.” Now that he is in an executive position that really demands some of these skills, he is eager for a refresher course, saying, “I think there’s more I can learn even in like management but also in, um, yeah just like how to…continue you know learning on how to run an organization, I mean every time I’ve gotten training I get a lot out of it.”

Considering the value that my participants place on continued learning and the role it plays in sustaining their well-being, it is clear that programs such as the Rockwood
Leadership Program, Environmental Leadership Program, Center for Whole Communities, and Midwest Academy are performing an invaluable role in the regional ENP sector. It wasn’t clear in my conversations with participants just how aware they all were that these kinds of training programs exist. But because of the value that participants who have participated in these programs have found in the learning they provide, and because of the role that such learning appears to play in sustaining my participants in their work, I feel it is important to make sure that the availability and benefits of these programs are widely broadcast in the regional ENP sector. Ideally, such awareness would begin even when people are undergraduates, putting the seed in their mind that these more alternative avenues to continued learning exist. And, as people move into and out of graduate studies (as many of my participants have) and consider that their formal learning may be finished, it would be useful to once again make them aware of these avenues for continued learning. Professional networks and organizations offer a final method for raising awareness about such continuing education programs. These programs appear to be already using these networks and organizations to effectively spread awareness about their offerings. The advent of, and rapid rise in, the popularity of different tools for social networking (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn) offer new opportunities for these continuing education programs to spread their message. These programs would do well to keep a keen pulse on this dynamic area, making sure that they are using all the tools available and staying attuned to those social networking tools that appear to be most popular among their specific audience.
Kovan & Dirkx (2003) suggest that sometimes moving on to other positions is the solution—albeit temporary—for environmental professionals on the verge of burnout; once again, however, in their research they do not consider why that feeling arises and how that emotion relates to the level of learning people are experiencing. In speaking with my participants, it appeared as though deciding to move on, feeling burnt-out, and feeling a diminishment in the learning curve were all a part of the same structure, with the latter of these being at the base: feeling that they had crested the learning curve in their existing position brought on feelings of burn-out, prompting a decision to leave, so as to continue the learning curve. In the passage below, Tara discusses her decision to leave a previous position and describes the relationship she feels between professional satisfaction, personal well-being, continued learning, and the decision to move on:

I was just learning less, you get to a point where the learning curve is just [laughing a bit] not quite there as much or if any and to me that was the signal, “OK, it’s time to move on” ….I just didn’t feel like I was learning anymore and so for me that, that was the time when I felt like I needed to change so I don’t know if you’d call that a low point, but um it sort of was because I mean I wasn’t happy because I wasn’t learning, so that’s when I felt that I needed to do something different.

So, for organizations seeking to retain their staff, it appears as though ensuring continued learning is a key area on which to focus. This presents obvious challenges within small organizations, but perhaps with some creativity solutions could be found; for example, I can imagine “work exchange” programs allowing executives to transfer to another
organization for a period of time so as to continue along the learning curve. They could then bring that learning—and the sense of personal renewal my participants experience through learning—back to their own organizations and implement facets of it. In doing so, they could continue their own learning at their home organization and, in turn, sharing that learning with the other staff in their organization, enhancing their job satisfaction.

Mentoring is another area of promise. Carrie is coming to end of her current professional development program and the prospect of wrapping up that learning adventure presents her with some unease: “I anticipate that I’m gonna have that same, you know, antsy or something after a couple of years, like now, you know…what’s the next challenge?” This is a legitimate concern, given the voracious appetite my participants have for learning and the vital role it plays in sustaining them as regional ENP professionals. Fortunately, as noted in the Discussion, their love for learning is matched with a love for sharing learning; so, as these professionals mature into their roles as leaders in the regional ENP landscape, mentoring offers an avenue for pursuing both. Considering her upcoming completion of the program, Carrie alludes to the opportunities for sharing learning that await: “Yeah, so it’s finishing up, you know, but obviously you’re never, like, totally done, you do the year fellowship and then, um, you continue as a senior fellow.” While many authors herald the value of mentoring in the environmental field (e.g., Ranney, 1992; Tilt, 1992; Whelan, 2000), they do so primarily from the perspective that mentoring is a useful way for junior environmental professionals to learn from more senior professionals. Mentoring would also appear to present great value to these more senior professionals, first by allowing them to learn through the lens of more
junior colleagues, second by challenging them to reflect on their own practices in the process of sharing them with others, and third by presenting them with the new challenges involved in becoming a teacher of others.

**What Kind of Training?**

In his survey of environmental professionals, Snow (1992) found that only 2% of their time is spent on professional development. That said, he notes that there are mixed feelings about the effectiveness of such training, and concludes, “It is personal refreshment and rejuvenation they long for, not professional training” (p. 145). This contrasts with what my participants expressed. Though they certainly saw great value in personal refreshment and sought to include (and typically increase) that in their lives, any participant who mentioned prior involvement in professional development training mentioned it positively and expressed keen interest in continuing it, a finding Whelan (2000) corroborates.

There are, of course, a myriad assortment of curricula that trainings can pursue, and perhaps this accounts for the differences in opinions regarding the value of training. Strauss (1999) suggests that, “The most common regret that [ESP] graduates have regarding their education is that they did not take more science, laboratory, and field work courses” (pp. 12-13), and Simberloff (1992) suggests that ENP professionals need to continually stay on top of the scientific advancements in their area. So continuing education in the sciences would be one avenue for professional development to take. None of my participants mentioned pursuing training in this area, nor mentioned any interest in doing so, and most seemed generally satisfied with and confident in the level
of scientific training they had received as undergraduates (and, for some, as graduate students).

Training in the leadership dimensions of ENP work is another area that professional development curricula could address. Discussing the Conservation Leadership Fund’s recommendations for college curricula, Foster (1992) says, “It was thought the prospective professionals would profit from receiving as much training in the human dimension as in the technical and scientific aspects of natural resources” (p. 25). Many of participants did mention that they had wished there had been more focus on the kinds of leadership, management, and administrative skills that their work in regional ENPs now demand. Lacking that training in their undergraduate curricula, some have sought those skills out via graduate study, while others have had to learn the bulk of these skills on-the-job. Both those who pursued managerial-related graduate degrees and those who have not expressed support for professional development in this area. Susan participated in a “Conservation Finance Camp” recently and found the experience “personally stimulating,” and Casey very much appreciated the leadership dimensions of his programs, saying that the various trainings and exercises were helpful “in thinking through that you’re a leader and people see you as a leader.” For organizations offering professional development opportunities to regional ENP professionals, continued offerings in the areas of leadership, management, and administration are encouraged, as they were regarded as valuable among these participants.

Crowfoot (1992) notes, “Most environmental and natural resource programs now seek to strengthen students’ scientific training” (p. 188), and that only recently have the
social sciences and other areas “crept in.” This is a shortcoming, for as he notes,
“Relying exclusively on scientific methods is no longer viable,” and that “other modes of
analysis are needed to cultivate an appreciation and love of the environment as well as an
orientation and intuition that are a part of nature itself” (p. 200). Crowfoot is not alone in
this call for the integration of multiple perspectives into environmental professionals’
training (e.g., de Boer, 1997; Kaza, 2005; Whelan, 2000). Viewing environmental
problems through these reflective perspectives enables practitioners to “raise questions
often overlooked by scientific and economic approaches to problem solving” (Kaza,
relevant environmental issues is an entirely inadequate preparation, according to many
activists” (Learning to Save the World, para. 1). What is more, in follow-up interviews
with environmental professionals who have participated in environmental training that
explore dimensions of the humanities he found, “such training is highly valued, results in
identifiable improvements in advocacy work, and is rare in the movement” (Learning to
Save the World, para. 3) and that more experienced professionals desired opportunities
for more advanced training.

One challenge in the undergraduate curriculum is trying to fit in all the different
important facets of interdisciplinary areas like ESP. As Susan asked, “Just from an
undergrad standpoint how much can you really know about ecology and environmental
policy and environmental law?” But, in the same breath as she posed this question, she
told me of an “absolutely phenomenal professor” during college who challenged students
to explore their concepts of home and how it contributed to their career choice.

Laughing, she told me:

I need to go back and read that paper every couple years, every couple years and especially when I kind of get to a career juncture and I think “What do I, where do I go, what do I do next?” I read that paper, um, because it, it has some insights that he kind of challenged us, you know, personal insights that he kind of challenged us to tap into, um, so anyways that was the other part of my academic experience I would point to that’s been important in an ongoing way.

Integrating more of these kinds of exploration into the undergraduate curriculum would certainly be valuable; but with the need to address a variety of disciplines it is unlikely that it will be addressed to the degree that it perhaps ideally should. Professional development programs would do well to address this gap. James Thornton, a former National Resources Defense Council litigator who now trains environmental activists in these areas reports, “People who stay in an activist role and open up in some form of contemplative work will have their activism enormously enriched” (de Boer, 1997, p. 21).

Allowing them to build collegial networks, build managerial skills, and explore the inner dimensions of activism, as professionals enter into the field and work through the challenges in presents, professional training has served as valuable sustenance to many of my participants; as Casey told me, “Every time I’ve gotten training I get a lot out of it.” Environmental professionals need to be made aware of such sustenance opportunities, but awareness may not be the crux of the issue. With so many roles to play...
in their organizations and so many fires to tend to, these kinds of professional development may now appear urgent; but, if we are to retain healthy, committed leaders in the regional ENP sector, this needs to be seen as so. Boards, staff, and other parts of the organization must clearly communicate that pursuing such professional development opportunities is not just acceptable, but expected.

The light of research needs to be shone upon these kinds of professional development programs. For starters, in light of Snow’s (1992) findings that most ENP professionals prioritized personal respite over professional development, in contrast with my own participants’ stories, research into the prioritization of these two areas would be valuable. Next, investigation into aspects of existing programs would provide a baseline: What do the existing programs’ curricula look like? What areas are currently well-addressed and what areas are underexplored? Lastly, what are participants’ experiences? Existing professional development programs are constructed in a variety of different ways and address a variety of different aspects of ENP leadership—Which areas are most sought by applicants? Which areas are most valued by participants? Which areas are left still unaddressed?

The participants in my research expressed a deep hunger for continued learning in their lives; continued learning was often equated with continued personal and professional satisfaction. My participants indicated that professional development programs can help to satiate this hunger, but it is not clear which aspects of these programs were most sought or most ultimately valuable. Continued research is necessary
to make sure that such programs go beyond merely satisfying the hunger for learning and sustain the body, mind, and spirit as well.

Welcoming the Soon-To-Be Majority: Fostering Diversity in ESP and ENP

In the preceding discussion, I have made several program and research recommendations about ESP and ENP, based upon what my participants told me about their experiences as ESP undergraduates who have shown sustained commitment to working in the regional ENP sector. However, in making these recommendations it is important to underscore the point I made in Chapter Three, when discussing the limitations of this study: These recommendations are based upon the stories told to me by my participants, all of whom are of European descent. The reason that all my participants are European-American is because I found it exceedingly difficult to locate people of diversity who had been ESP undergraduates and had shown sustained commitment to working in the regional ENP sector. This is a point of concern and is the basis for my final point of discussion—as with all areas of the environmental movement, the regional ENP sector would benefit from increased diversity. The need for increased diversity in the environmental movement is not an original observation (e.g., Enderle, 2007; Hall, et al., 2005; Jordan & Snow, 1992), but that should not take away from this point’s weight or value.

In the course of recruiting participants, I had the opportunity to view many ESP websites and learn about their programs. While most websites depicted some people of diversity, those people were not typically engaged in work that appeared to be directly benefitting people of diversity: they were weighing bear cubs or mapping wild lands or
tagging waterfowl for migration. Hawken (2007) notes that the environmental movement is becoming increasingly conscious of its connections with issues of social justice of concern to people of diversity. ESP would do well to both include such linkages in their programs and make those linkages apparent in their public presentations. Hall, et al (2005) suggest that one effective way to increase the linkages between ESP and issues of social justice is for ESP to cultivate relationships with other cultural, ethnic, or gender studies programs on campus. Additionally, they suggest offering courses that might be of interest to underrepresented students, such as Environmental Justice or Sustainable Development. Because underrepresented students often hail from more urban environments, I would also suggest course offerings that link environmental study to issues in the urban context. Such courses would both address issues of more direct importance to these students and holds the corollary potential for developing the sense of place that compelled my participants to work in regional ENPs.

Finally, there is much to be explored in terms of research, and so the questions are many: What draws students of diversity into ESP? What are the experiences of students of diversity in ESP? What factors are prominent in their decisions about professions after graduation? What keeps them in those professions for the duration? Bonta & Jordan (2007) note that people of diversity constitute over 30% of our country’s population and that by 2050 people of diversity will “almost certainly comprise the majority of the population” (p. 15) in the United States. Higher education and the environmental movement cannot afford to ignore those statistics. Both must develop a more
sophisticated understanding about what propels people of diversity into ESP and what spurs them on into working in—and remaining in—the ENP field.

In Closing: The Fruits of Passion and Positivity

This research process traces its beginnings to a comment in Parks Daloz et al’s (1996) *Common Fire*, in which noted environmentalist James Thornton reported feelings of abandonment and loneliness among many of his peers. I read that book in my first doctoral course four years ago, and began thinking about it and investigating. Two years ago I began the formal research process. Now, I have read hundreds of articles, sent out even more hundreds of recruitment inquiries, logged hundreds of miles driving around the region for interviews and tens of hours for interviews both in person and on the phone. I have brought those interviews home and transcribed them at roughly a day of transcribing per hour of interview, followed by more hours researching coding software and many, many more doing the actual coding of the data.

As themes emerged, it became clear that there is still much research to be done investigating the undergraduate ESP programs and the lives of ENP professionals. In this chapter, I have highlighted some of the areas for future research that my own research points toward. Travel was an important early experience for many of my participants, yet many people have traveled in their early years and are left unaffected—why is this the case? Research investigating how ESP students create bonds with their particular undergraduate places, and on how those bonds with place function in sustaining them as ENP professionals would be valuable. Professional development programs offer another area for fruitful research. More information is needed about the value environmental
professionals place on such training and specific information is needed about the kinds of curricula currently in place and participants’ experiences with the various kinds of training being offered. The personal side of environmental work is another area to explore. My findings regarding participants’ families of choice raise some interesting questions regarding the dynamics of professional ENP work and the personal beliefs and attitudes of those engaged in it. One thing we do know about the professionals engaged in ENP work is that they are almost all white. Research must explore what draws students of diversity into ESP majors, what their experiences are during the undergraduate years, what shapes their career decisions, and what keeps those who choose the ENP sector engaged in that sector over the long haul.

Research typically raises many more questions than it addresses. But, as themes emerged from the data, one theme that I found was that of passion and positivity among my participants. My participants told stories different from what has been suggested by some of the literature. Yes, my participants are challenged in their work, and yes those work challenges spill over into their personal lives; They wonder about the long-term financial viability of continuing with their work, they get impatient with the slow pace of change and the obstinacy of the players setting that pace, and they occasionally grapple with resultant bouts of doubt and negativity. Their stories, however, are by and large, stories of positivity, hope, and resolve. On the one hand, this should not be surprising—after all, these participants stated up front a commitment to their work, so we might expect a positive outlook. But commitment does not always spring forth from wells of positivity; in his interview with de Boer (1997) Thornton admitted that his own work had
often been fueled by “a kind of righteous anger” (p. 14), an experience many of his colleagues shared. My participants were committed and they were generally positive, standing as successful models for professional engagement in the regional ENP world. Having listened to each person’s stories, it is clear that a myriad of influences propelled them toward where they are today; in their shared story, the power of place and the potency of learning appear to lie at the root of this outlook. As undergraduates they learned of the challenges facing our environment. In class and on campus they transformed that learning into constructive action, developing identities as environmentalists, developing skills as environmental professionals, developing a passion for the transformative power of learning, and developing relationships with place.

Working now as regional ENP professionals, they are intimately involved with the protection of a particular place. Learning about that place, its people, and its politics, a relationship of sharing has been established, each giving to the other.

I am grateful for my participants for the stories they have shared with me. I am concerned about our environment, but I am suspicious of any work that springs forth from anger, fear, despair, or any other negativity—from a bitter tree can only come bitter fruit. I believe that the strength of the environmental movement is only equal to the physical, mental, and spiritual health of those working within it. Stories of isolation and loneliness, stories of despair in the environmental movement concerned me. My participants’ voices have soothed some of that concern. There is still much in the environmental world that causes me alarm, but in hearing my participants’ stories of passion and positivity, and in hearing of the fruits that have sprung forth from that
passion and positivity, I am nourished anew. I am grateful for the good work they are sharing with our world.
References


APPENDIX A

(Representative Sample of Participant Recruitment E-mail Inquiry Sent to Regional ENP Organizations and Undergraduate Environmental Studies Programs)

Hello [insert organization/institution contact person’s name]

“What impacts do the undergraduate experiences of environmental program majors have in creating an ability to sustain themselves as regional environmental nonprofit professionals?”—This is the question I am exploring for my doctoral dissertation in the University of Vermont’s Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program. I anticipate that this research will yield information that can improve the capacity of collegiate environmental programs to produce professionals capable of sustained commitment in the environmental nonprofit sector.

I am seeking [insert organization/institution name] assistance in gathering research participants who have earned baccalaureate degrees in environmental programs and have at least five years of professional experience in regional environmental nonprofit organizations and feel strongly committed to their work. I will ask participants to take part in a sixty-minute interview that will explore links that may exist between each participant’s experiences as an undergraduate environmental program major and her/his current commitment as a regional environmental nonprofit professional.

My hope is that you will see the value of this research and the important role that your [organization’s staff/environmental program’s alums] can play in it, and that you will be willing to send them an emailed letter (attached) that requests their involvement, should they meet the selection criteria. Please contact me if you are in need of any further information regarding this request. I hope to hear from you soon, and in the meantime, I wish all the continued best of success to you and your [organization/program].

Sincerely,

Kelly Rossiter
tkrossiter@yahoo.com
802-535-1498
Hello,

“What impacts do the undergraduate experiences of environmental program majors have in creating an ability to sustain themselves as regional environmental nonprofit professionals?”—This is the question I am exploring for my doctoral dissertation in the University of Vermont’s Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program. I anticipate that this research will yield information that can improve the capacity of collegiate environmental programs to produce professionals capable of sustained commitment in the environmental nonprofit sector.

I am seeking research participants who have earned baccalaureate degrees in environmental programs and have worked for at least five years as professionals in regional environmental nonprofit organizations and feel strongly committed to their work. If this describes you, then I would ask for you to take part in an interview lasting no more than sixty minutes at a site of your choosing. During the interview, I will ask you to explore any links that may exist between your experiences as an undergraduate environmental program major and your current commitment as a regional environmental nonprofit professional. After I transcribe the interview, you will have the opportunity to correct, clarify, or elaborate upon the transcription. Throughout the research process, strict measures will be used to maintain participant confidentiality.

By broadening our understanding of how collegiate environmental program curricula function to produce professionals capable of sustained commitment in the environmental nonprofit sector we can better ensure the continued effectiveness of the environmental movement. With this in mind, I hope that you will see the value of the research I am pursuing and—should you meet the criteria described—I sincerely hope that you will see the value of your participation in it. Please contact me for more information about this research and/or how you can become involved. In the meantime, I wish you well with all of your own important work.

Sincerely,

Kelly Rossiter
tkrossiter@yahoo.com
802-535-1498
APPENDIX C

Interview Questions

The questions for the interview, with italicized comments regarding the structure and flow, are as follows:

1) Please tell me about your current work—what are the successes and challenges you’re encountering?

2) Can you tell me about what sustains you in your work as an ENP professional?

In describing what sustains you in your work as an ENP professional, I heard you say (list key components they mentioned)...

3) Did your academic experiences as an ESP student play a role in developing those components (if the participant lists several components, I will phrase this question to explore each one in turn)? If so, how?

4) Do you feel other aspects of your undergraduate educational experience played a role in developing those components (if the participant lists several components, I will phrase this question to explore each one in turn)? If so, how?
During the course of Questions #2&3, I will ask the following question, when appropriate:

5) Are there particular moments or stories that stand out when considering the development of this component? If so, please share.

6) I’m sure you see that I am trying to understand both what sustains people in this hard work and how undergraduate experiences in environmental education contributes to that ability in sustaining oneself. Are there additional things that you want to say about this?

Thank you…..

Note: For purposes of clarity here, I have used terms such as “undergraduate educational experience” and “components” throughout the question series. During the course of each actual interview, my wording may change to reflect the language of the participant (e.g., “component” may become “elemental piece”).
APPENDIX D

Statement of Consent

You have been given and have read, or have had read to you, a summary of this research study. It has been explained to your full satisfaction. Should you have further questions about the research, you realize that you are free to contact the person conducting the study at the address and telephone number below.

You realize that your participation is voluntary and you are aware that you may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty or prejudice. You understand that the confidentiality of all research data associated with this study will be maintained to the maximum extent allowable by law.

You understand that you may contact Nancy Stalnaker, the Institutional Review Board Director at the University of Vermont at (802) 656-5040 should you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research project.

You agree to participate in this study and you understand that you will receive a signed copy of this form.

This form is valid only if the Committee on Human Research’s current stamp of approval is shown below.

Please indicate whether you wish to participate in this project by checking a statement below and signing your name.

_____ I wish to participate in this research project and agree to be audio-taped.

_____ I wish to participate in this research project but DO NOT agree to be audio-taped.

_____ I do not wish to participate in this research project.

____________________________________            ____________________________
Signature of Participant                Date                Name of Participant Printed

____________________________________                ____________________________
Signature of Principal Investigator or Designee    Date                Name of Principal Investigator or Designee Printed

Principal Investigator:
Kel Rossiter
1160 Cold Hill Road
Lyndonville, VT 05851
(802) 535-1498
APPENDIX E

Informed Consent

Title of Research Project: An Investigation of Environmental Program (ESP) Graduates Working in Regional Environmental Nonprofits (ENPs)

Principle Investigator: Kel Rossiter
Faculty Sponsor: Jill Tarule, Ed.D.

You are being invited to take part in this research directed toward studying the relationship between your undergraduate environmental program experiences and your commitment as a professional in a regional environmental nonprofit organization. This study is being undertaken as a part of my dissertation work as a doctoral student in the University of Vermont’s Educational Leadership & Policy Studies Program. You are encouraged to ask questions and take the opportunity to discuss the study with anybody you think can help you make a decision regarding participation.

Approximately 10-12 people who have earned baccalaureate degrees in environmental programs and have been working at least five years in regional environmental nonprofit organizations will take part in this study. Existing research indicates that there are many challenges for professionals in the ENP sector. You are being asked to take part in an interview lasting no more than sixty minutes. This interview may occur in-person or on the telephone. The interview will include six questions that ask you to explore any links that may exist between your experiences as an undergraduate environmental program major and your current commitment as a regional environmental nonprofit professional. There are no correct answers to the interview questions. Throughout the process, the focus is on your stories, ideas, and perspectives regarding the role of your undergraduate experiences and your current professional work.

If you agree to participate, your interview responses will be recorded on a digital recording device. Recordings of all interviews will be destroyed after all interviews have been completed, transcribed, and analyzed. After the interviews have been transcribed, you will be given the opportunity to review and correct any transcriptions or to offer any further information or clarifications you deem important. Your name, the names of any relatives, colleagues, or friends, the name of your employer or organization, or any other identifying information will not be used in the written analyses. The security of interview materials will be maintained by keeping them in a locked file in a secure location. The results of this study may eventually be published and information may be exchanged between research investigators, but your confidentiality will be maintained.

If you decide at any time that you want to end your participation in this study, you are free to do so, and you will have the right to decide whether or not previously collected data should be destroyed. There is always a possibility of breach of confidentiality, however strict measures will be taken to minimize this potential risk. This research involvement does not provide any direct payments or benefits to you. However, your involvement will be very helpful to future environmental program graduates and environmental nonprofit professionals.

You may contact Mr. Kel Rossiter, the Investigator in charge of this study, at (802) 535-1498 for more information about this study. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research project, you should contact Nancy Stalnaker, the Director of the Research Protections Office at the University of Vermont at 802-656-5040.
APPENDIX F

The following tables offer a visual representation of the information presented in this document. The pseudonyms of the ten participants are arranged on the vertical axes and the various themes discussed in the findings are arranged on the horizontal axes. An “X” designates that a participant’s interview was coded as containing material related to the particular theme indicated. Each table depicts a different section of the findings and they are arranged in the order that they are addressed in the findings.

This visual representation provides another potentially helpful overview of the interview data and indicates that saturation was reached, as evidenced by the fact that all the coded themes excepting one are addressed by three or more participants. However, the brevity of this depiction of the interview data obscures important nuances. Each of my participants touched on a range of themes and touched on those themes with differing amounts of emphasis and emotion. These tables do not attempt to quantify those aspects, but merely to note that a particular participant’s stories touched on a particular theme.
## Challenges to Regional Environmental Nonprofit Work

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<th>Name (Pseudonyms)</th>
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