

Environmental Sites of Conscience: Exploring Issues to Inspire Visitor Action at Environmental History Sites

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I can imagine working with three kinds of environmental sites of conscience. One kind are the limited number of internationally significant sites where environmental catastrophes occurred, such as Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania, Chernobyl in the Ukraine, the Love Canal in New York, the Ninth Ward in New Orleans, or Bhopal in India. The U.S. National Park Service already administers one such site, the Johnstown Flood National Memorial in Pennsylvania. But most of these sites are not currently interpreted to the public. At these sites, the public interpretation would narrate the history of the disaster, with a focus on issues of environmental justice.

But I can imagine working even more with a second, much larger number of historic sites that exemplify the nation's past or present relationship with the environment. Rather than single out particular historic sites as environmental sites of conscience, I would seek to interpret the environmental dimensions of every historic site. For example, at the initial National Park Service Civic Engagement conference in New York City in December 2001, the Superintendent of Shenandoah National Park in Virginia discussed how her park interpreted the damage that acid rain from nearby coal-fired electric power plants caused to the flora in the park. This is a great opportunity to make visible to the public the choices made every day between modern convenience and environmental quality. At Manzanar, in California, Japanese-Americans who were confined there during World War II recalled the dust storms that swept across the camp, the result of the depletion of water in the nearby Owens Valley by the Los Angeles Water Department. Industrial history sites such as the water powered textile mills at Lowell National Historical Park are logical places to discuss the control of nature as well as the displacement of farmers (and fish) caused by the mill dams. So too are the historical remains of mining sites, such as the Anaconda copper open pit now full of toxic water in Butte, Montana. Living history farms are good places to demonstrate how land was shaped by agriculture over time, as well as to explore pesticide versus organic farming practices.

The third kind of environmental site of conscience is even more plentiful; exploring the historical dimensions of everyday environmental sites. For five years in the 1990s, I conducted a monthly environmental history seminar for elementary and secondary school teachers called "Where We Live." Each month we met at a different site in Western Massachusetts and discussed what happened there, from agricultural to industrial sites, from protected woodlands to a municipal waste treatment plant, from an elite mansion with formal gardens to a local poor farm (still in existence as a homeless shelter). We never met in the parking lot of a suburban shopping mall to discuss the history of sprawl, but that would have been an appropriate spot. This suggests that environmental sites of conscience can be not only a network of special places, but also a historical approach to the everyday environment.

One site near where I live is the Quabbin Reservoir. This was created during the 1930s to provide more water to the Boston metropolitan area, in the process flooding four western

Massachusetts towns. The Quabbin is a good place to discuss issues of environmental justice—why were these towns sacrificed so that Boston could have more water—as well as a more positive message since the area has become an “accidental wilderness” full of wildlife that would not have habitat if the land surrounding the reservoir had not been strictly protected from development.

In recent years, environmental historians have focused not only on the relationship of humans and nature, but also on how the relationship between different social classes, ethnic groups, and regions are manifest in the environment. This social historical approach to environmental sites of conscience has great potential as a common interpretive thread as a network of sites develops.

Exploring Issues to Inspire Visitor Action at Environmental History Sites **Tabitha (Beth) Erdey**

- What site do you work with or can imagine working with? Briefly describe what about this site is important for visitors?

Currently I work as a seasonal and intermittent interpretive ranger at the Nez Perce National Historical Park, headquartered at Spalding, Idaho. This site is important for visitors because of the unique character of the park. Nez Perce National Historical Park is the only park of its kind in the United States, consisting of 38 sites dispersed across four states. As such, the park is charged with interpreting 11,000 years of Nez Perce culture as well as the Lewis and Clark Expedition, Christian missionary activity, regional natural resource use, and the Nez Perce War of 1877.

The sites of Nez Perce National Historical Park lie within three distinct ecoregions, each with marked differences in topography, vegetation, and climate. The majority of the park’s sites are found on the *shortgrass prairies* of the Palouse Grasslands and Missouri Basin. The *sagebrush steppe* of the Columbia and Snake River Plateaus includes park sites Camas Meadows, Dug Bar, Buffalo Eddy, the Nez Perce Cemetery and the Nez Perce Campsites. The remaining park sites lie within the *conifer/alpine meadows* of the Blue Mountains, the Salmon River Mountains, the basins and ranges of southwestern Montana, and the northern Rocky Mountains of Idaho and Montana. *Conifer/alpine meadow* park sites within the park include Lolo Trail and Pass, Lostine Campsite, Old Chief Joseph Gravesite, Joseph Canyon Viewpoint, and Big Hole National Battlefield. Each of the three regions supports abundant wildlife populations including raptors, waterfowl, aquatic species, and large and small mammals.

This rich history of local, national, and international significance combined with the complex ecology upon which the park’s sites stand are distinctive draws to visitors. The cultural, geologic, and ecological histories of the park provide countless interpretive options for park staff. A majority of visitors travel to the park expecting exhibits and programming focused upon Nez Perce history alone; however, given the unique character of the park, it is possible to incorporate environmental issues into interpretive plans which

will ultimately enrich visitor understanding of both the Nez Perce people and the changing environment of the park.

- What are some contemporary environmental issues and topics that you currently raise or would like to raise with visitors?

Given the vast history interpreted by the park, current environmental issues addressed by the park include issues of water quality and aquatic habitat, vegetation issues related to native plants and invasive species, and regional resource use by tribes of the Northwest and Columbia Plateau as well as non-tribal entities. These issues are conveyed to visitors but could be greatly expanded upon. Discussion of broader historical context of westward expansion and resource utilization in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana can all easily be tied into interpretive plans within the park to enrich current interpretive topics. I am specifically interested in incorporating interpretation of environmental issues concurrently with that of traditional cultural properties within the park (Camas Prairie, Dug Bar, Buffalo Eddy, Heart of the Monster, Weippe Prairie, Hasotino, Lolo Trail and Pass, Lostine Campsite, Musselshell Meadows). Each of these sites are significant to the history of the Nez Perce but are also indicative of environmental change over time and can address issues of climate change, issues of plant and animal habitat degradation, and regional resource use.

- What are some specific strategies for programming and exhibitions you could use to engage audiences to learn more about these issues, and become involved in shaping issues and/or take action in their communities?

Current interpretive models utilize ranger talks and tours at park sites as well as presentations at local campsites, schools, and community functions. Park resource managers also partner with local, tribal, state and other federal agencies in conducting research and publication of findings. Specific strategies to enhance current programs would ideally incorporate environmental issues into these models as well as developing new programming models to engage, or at least increase awareness of issues, for local and out-of-state visitors. During the late spring, the park hosts hundreds of local fourth graders as a part of public school curriculum involving Idaho state history. This is a prime opportunity to address the above task. The park could increase volunteer opportunities for resource studies (current programs already exist but could be expanded). Altogether, Nez Perce National Historical Park has the ability to incorporate historic topics with environmental issues (contemporary and historic) into its programming and provide a more meaningful, pertinent and engaging visitor experience.

**Exploring Issues to Inspire Visitor Action at Environmental History Sites
Harry Klinkhamer, Forest Preserve District of Will County**

1. What site do you work with or can imagine working with? Briefly describe what about this site is important for visitors.

There is one current site, three other sites under development, and a fourth potential site in the initial stages of planning that I will be working with that could qualify as environmental sites of conscience.

Currently, I oversee a satellite site of the Forest Preserve District of Will County called the Joliet Iron Works Historic Site (<http://www.reconnectwithnature.org/preserves-and-trails/joliet-iron-works-historic-site.asp>). This site is an industrial ruin of the Joliet Iron Works, an iron smelting and steel production facility that operated from 1872 into the 1930s. It produced steel to help rebuild Chicago after the 1871 fire and supplied railroad tracks and barbed wire for America's expansion westward. Acquired as a brownfield by the District in the 1990s, the ruins currently include an interpretive trail that discusses the iron making process and the types of jobs workers held at the site. For residents of Joliet, the Iron Works helped give the city its nickname as the "City of Stone and Steel" (Joliet was also known for its limestone quarries).

There are three other sites currently owned by the District that are in early stages of development that could also fall under this category: Vermont Cemetery Nature Preserve, and the Thomas Clow Farm and Kropp-Schulenberg Home and Prairie at Riverview Farmstead. The Vermont Cemetery nature Preserve (<http://www.reconnectwithnature.org/preserves-and-trails/Vermont-Cemetery.asp>) is a typical pioneer cemetery with a typical preservation history. It is the resting place for many of the early settlers of Wheatland Township in Will County who came from Vermont. As families moved on and died out, the cemetery was neglected and retaken by the prairie. Its neglect (as is often the case with good preservation examples) meant that the site did not develop as the township and county did. Therefore the ground is a good two feet higher there—a testament to the agriculturally-led soil erosion surrounding it—and is considered a prime example of pre-settlement prairie. This site is an opportunity to present to the public both early Will County history and what pre-settlement Will County prairie looks like.

Riverview Farmstead (<http://www.reconnectwithnature.org/preserves-and-trails/Riverview-Farmstead.asp>) is home to the Thomas Clow Farm and the Kropp-Schulenberg Home and Prairie. The former is a 19th century pioneer farm in Wheatland Township of Will County, the latter is a mid-20th century site preserved for its environmental history. Together they make an interesting ying-yang story of man's ideas of land use. The Clow Farm has three remaining structures that help tell the story of agricultural growth in Chicago's hinter regions that aided in the growth of northeastern Illinois. The Kropp-Schulenberg site helps preserve the story of David Kropp and Ray Schulenberg—two individuals who pioneered in native prairie restoration and converted a farm field into a pristine prairie that has served as the father and grandfather to many restorations in the region. The Clow Farm offers the opportunity to remind people how man has shaped and used land and more

importantly where our food comes from. The Kropp-Schulenberg site allows us to inspire the public with how native plant restoration was a part of the mid-20th century conservation movement.

A fourth site is merely in the conceptual stage. If given approval and funding is sought, the District intends to develop a natural heritage museum. This facility will look at mankind's relationship with nature as it impacted Will County. It will cover areas of land use and development, the environment, and cultural landscapes. It will give the citizens of Will County and others the chance to see how their decisions as a community and society impacts where they live.

2. What are some contemporary environmental issues and topics that you currently raise or would like to raise with visitors?

With a new interpretive plan in the making for this site, we will have the chance to explore issues that were both directly and indirectly impacted by the Joliet Iron Works. Obvious topics come to mind such as pollution, labor strife and safety, and the impact of natural resource extraction. We can also expand the interpretation to discuss how railroads, steel girders, and barbed wire changed the American landscape.

At Riverview Farmstead, the Clow site speaks of land use as it pertains to turning prairie into agricultural practice and commodifying the end result; and reintroducing the public to where their food comes from. Kropp-Schulenberg Prairie allows us to bring up the issues of ecological restoration and a grassroots look at the conservation movement of the mid-twentieth century. It can inspire people with the belief that individuals can make a difference.

The natural heritage museum has the potential to challenge the public about the choices they make in developing where they live. Where does one find the balance between providing necessities and conveniences of modern life with the preservation and restoration of its natural resources? How has society shaped the environment and how has that environment responded to it? And ultimately, what role do we as a people, community, or society (specifically in Will County) have in being stewards of our land?

3. What are some specific strategies for programming and exhibitions you could use to engage audiences (e.g., local residents, students, visitors, and other stakeholders) to learn more about these issues, and become involved in shaping issues and/or take action in their communities?

Some ideas already in the works include an industrial archaeology summer camp, in-school programs that include role playing, a farmer's market, adapting the Leopold Education Project curriculum to put more emphasis on environmental history, partnering with local schools to provide multidisciplinary educational opportunities at these sites, and exhibitions on sprawl and land use.

4. Generate ideas for possible next steps for an Environmental Sites of Conscience network or collective project.

I think it would be beneficial for places with similar interpretive interests to stay in touch on how they are fulfilling those missions and creative ways to program and educate their communities. Finding time to meet in person where we could have time to concentrate and focus on these matters could come in the form of hitching on to a conference and setting aside extra time for the topic.

As for a project, perhaps developing a template for how a site can provide interdisciplinary programming and interpretation when it comes to defining “place.”

Kate Preissler

The Trustees of Reservations own and interpret over 103 historic and environmentally significant sites across Massachusetts. As Education Coordinator of the Trustees’ Pioneer Valley region, I design public programming for our specific environmental sites along with community project for youth in the City of Holyoke, where my branch office is located. The City of Holyoke was a major mill town created by the Boston Associates in the 19th Century in the style of their other ventures in Lowell and Lawrence. Despite its current state (Holyoke is one of the poorest communities in Massachusetts) I see in this city exceptional potential to interpret the story of our past relationships with the environment and to motivate an urban population with a substantial Puerto Rican contingent to become champions for the environment. Works such as Theodore Steinberg’s *Nature Incorporated: Industrialization and the Water of New England*, have convinced me to look to new thematic subjects from which to draw environmental lessons, specifically content that directly addresses the history of the Connecticut River, the Boston Associates’ manipulation of local waterways, and the past and future of the Holyoke canal system as a source of renewable energy. A newly announced plan to create a major technology center in Holyoke, wherein the canals would be used not only to power facilities but also as a way to keep massive server blocks cool, has created an opportunity for increased conversations around many of these environmental themes.

Because the City of Holyoke neighbors both affluent towns and agriculturally based communities, it offers unique potential for programming that addresses the divides that exist between several branches of the environmental movement. Biases still exist which prevent collaborative work from being achieved or even common goals from being recognized. An example of this that I run across constantly in my work is the common perception that conservation is a movement of the elite, disconnected from the realities of urban residents or those who rely on the land and its resources their subsistence. This belief is only reinforced when individuals and agencies continue to send out messages promoting romanticized views of how “nature” should rightly be enjoyed. Value judgments that reflect an elitist view of how to appropriately experience the natural world, such as sites which bar mountain bikers from their trails but allow horseback riding, alienate those

from other cultural, socioeconomic, generational, and other backgrounds who are attracted to natural spaces for other reasons. A primary goal of my programming is to allow space to air some of these differences, to help people rediscover shared goals and values having to do with the land, and to move forward as a movement together rather than in pieces. The major themes that I hope this coalition will help me to address are issues regarding the bias inherent in these constructed views of nature; charges of elitism that have, sometimes rightly, been aimed at conservation and environmentalists; cultural differences in land use and interaction; and environmental programming that addresses the need to acknowledge human responsibility and the continued impact of our chosen lifestyles.

Environmental history programming that focuses both on past destruction done to the environment and also more recent efforts to mitigate the damage can act as a bridge between today's environmental activists and those interested in the history of their City. The City of Holyoke currently has exceptional ongoing programming related to its history, which is particularly focused on labor and immigration. This programming has fostered enthusiasm, volunteerism, and financial support for local history amongst many community members, especially those whose families have lived in Holyoke for several generations. Holyoke is also home to robust environmental justice programs, particularly within the Puerto Rican community. Innovative projects have brought messages to a range of Holyoke's residents about such topics as water quality, chemicals in the home, and nutrition. Finding ways to link these two endeavors could serve to forge connections between these two cultural groups in Holyoke and could lead to a stronger overall community. With this in mind, I hope to use the position of the Trustees – who, statewide, have acted as protectors of both our local historic and natural resources – to help people understand why the human history of the region cannot be separated out from its current environmental state.

In addition to my focus on the city as a whole, the Trustees own two properties in Holyoke of specific interest in relation to this coalition. The first site, Land of Providence, is being farmed by a local Puerto Rican community group, Nuestras Raices, as part of a program they have designed to help new city residents establish an economic base to get them started in a new life and to make sure that their families have access to fresh food. The property is within viewing distance of the urban center of Holyoke, abuts the river, encompasses the site of a sewer overflow pipe, open fields, floodplain forest, and agriculture land maintained in such a way that it reflect the farmers' Puerto Rican heritage. On this site in particular I can see the role of education being beneficial as a liaison between those who come to the property as environmental justice advocates or who farm the land to provide for their families and those who come to the land as recreational visitors, interested in the natural beauty and ecology of the property. These two groups embody two branches of the environmental movement that have become alienated from one another – environmental justice and conservation. Because of our shared physical presence on this piece of land it will be possible to combine our own messaging with that of Nuestras Raices and start to form one community of environmental activists within the region.

The second site, Little Tom, is currently closed to the public due to its proximity to a working quarry. The quarry is due to close and be turned over to the City in 2012, at which

time the Trustees along with their partners U.S. Fish and Wildlife, the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, and the Holyoke Boys and Girls Club, would like to turn Little Tom reservation and the old ski resort buildings which still stand on it, into a regional center for environmental education and engagement. Assessments of the quarry have mainly been focused on the practical obstacles it presents to the overall project, the most obvious being the physical danger it poses to any visitors. However, from an interpretational standpoint, the quarry also represents an important educational opportunity in that it is an irreparable scar across the side of a beloved natural and historic site. The sheer size and scale of the quarry will make it something that cannot be ignored or covered up and as such it presents the perfect starting point for testing out theories of using environmental sites to raise consciousness and confront the fact that our lifestyles do have a very real, very physical impact on the earth.

In order to bring a more diverse group of people onto our conservation sites, we have found it necessary to shift the major themes of our educational programming from more traditional ecology and natural history to programs that are more active in nature, that deal directly with environmental justice issues, or which promote local activism. One example of a program which combines all of these aspects is our Youth Conservation Corps (YCC). Holyoke is one of many Trustees' sites across the state to join in a growing trend to create and foster YCCs, modeled loosely on the spirit of the Civilian Conservation Corps of the New Deal era. These YCCs take the form of paid teams of teenagers who spend a summer working on environmentally-themed projects. The vision is that teenagers, many of whom come to the program interested mainly in the paycheck, will be inspired to pursue further engagement with environmental activities because of what they learn through the work that they do. These YCCs can take many different forms and projects can range from painting park benches to clearing invasive plants to building walking trails. Because we are working in the City of Holyoke it has been an important goal to not just bring the students to our "natural" properties to interact with the outdoors, but to have them do "environmental" work within the urban setting in which they reside. This program directly reflects one of our goals which is to remind people that while we highly value preserved natural places, being in a city does not mean that you have to feel detached or somehow less a part of "nature" or "the environment." As we continue to build our programming in Holyoke we have plans to both bring more Holyoke residents out to our reservations and facilitate within them a new level of comfort with the outdoors, and to draw people from the outlying communities into the City of Holyoke in order foster a better understanding of how humans have shaped the physical environment as well as highlight the work that groups are doing to try to heal some of the damage that has been done.