Promoting Environmental Sustainability Through Art

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Abstract

With the increasing prevalence of environmental degradation, promoting environmental sustainability is imperative in order to ensure natural resources are utilized in a responsible manner that indefinitely preserves renewability. While the University of California Merced has made notable efforts to contribute to promoting such sustainability, the aesthetic of its campus lacks prominent features of nature allowing its community to connect with the natural environment. This proposal introduces an innovative and practical program as a solution for this, in which environmental sustainability would be promoted through student-led art projects displayed throughout campus. By receiving funding from various campus-related organizations, this cost effective and inclusive program would grant $1,000 to a designated student committee each year to create sustainability-oriented artwork. As the results of existing research demonstrates art's potential to provoke powerful reactions, the student-led art produced by this program could compel influential reactions from the UC Merced community that reminds and encourages them to pursue sustainable lifestyles. Going further, this project would have several other significant benefits by providing artistic and administrative opportunities for students, raising awareness to environmental and social justice issues, increasing the quality of the campus' appearance, and more. Additionally, this could all be achieved while maintaining the preservation of the university's existing structure and its ability to blend in with its surrounding environment through strategic placement of these artworks.

Executive Summary

Sustainability is the ability to continue a defined behavior indefinitely. Environmental sustainability is the rates of renewable resource harvest, pollution creation, and non-renewable resource depletion that can be continued indefinitely. If they cannot be continued indefinitely, they are not sustainable (Thwink). It is very difficult to teach environmental sustainability, especially at a research institution such as this. UC Merced is developing a vertical shape to the campus, meaning there are many blank grey walls. With concrete walls and heavy smoggy air, our nearly treeless, dull campus is not a place that inspires "green thinking." The drabness of our campus is purely functional; bare concrete is cheap, offers better insulation effects than other building materials, helps the university to use resources sustainably, and blends in with a lackluster environment.

The solution offered here is to promote environmental sustainability through art. These works of art will be located in areas around campus that students frequent that are also currently bare, not in areas that would interfere with the campus' ability to blend in with the surrounding environment. These works will showcase our ability to draw attention to our surroundings, display our gratitude for the quality of education we receive, express our appreciation for our university and those that work and live here, and help to continually support our mission to reduce our reliance on nonrenewable resources. Students will be able to produce a product when given a budget of $1000 per year and criteria for sustainability-oriented artworks. This project will evolve with the campus and the student body through the years, allowing others to become conscious and aware of the world we live in, and prompting action to make a difference.

Problem

It is very difficult to teach environmental sustainability, especially at a research institution such as this. UC Merced is developing a vertical shape to the campus, meaning there are many blank grey walls. With concrete walls and heavy smoggy air, our nearly treeless, dull campus is not a place that inspires "green thinking." As students, we walk by these buildings on the way to our classes in our dusty town. Our buildings, walkways and classrooms are mostly bare concrete. Being surrounded by concrete is not visually appealing and seems to stifle our creativity and passions, but there are few credible sources of research that support this. We have yet to see a visual representation of our successes on campus, even though we may accomplish much through this institution. Aesthetics influence us too; if we pride ourselves in being "green" and sustainable, why does our campus look so bleak?

Art and environmental activism share a strong relationship. In the article, "Multiple Exposure," writer Jeremy Lehrer describes the "Dark Optimism" exhibition at New York City's Museum of Modern Art; it promotes the relationship between human society and the vulnerability of the land we occupy. This exhibit shows 44 photographs that Ansel Adams, an artist-activist, took of the Yosemite Valley from 1932 – 1968. Adams captured mountains, forests and geysers, as well as a series of the moon above the landscape. Lehrer explains that these stunning portraits have a purpose, "they inspire reverence for these landscapes and for the wisdom of preserving them…the modern viewer is also drawn to reflect on how these locations are fairing now…and how these images have the power to affect us emotionally and spiritually" (*Print* 16). An image may not be particularly dramatic or beautiful, but it can inspire people to change their habits. These art pieces can create campus awareness and a culture revolving around our environment, its vulnerability, and our everyday practices. Environmental art becomes the

everyday reminder that our actions have real-life consequences. If it can be used in practical ways to address climate change, why not cover our campus with art?

Some would argue that the drabness of our campus is purely functional. From discussions with professors around campus we learn that the bland colors and concrete serve to blend in with the surrounding environment of the valley and help the university to use resources sustainably. For instance, the concrete used on the buildings helps to insulate them, keeping them warm in the winter months and cool during our hot summers. Some of the concrete around UC Merced is reflective so as to offset the "heat island" effects that concrete can create on hot days. Bare concrete is cheap, offers better insulation effects than other building materials, and blends in with a lackluster environment. Some say the concrete reminds one of the grey granite of Yosemite's Half Dome. It is not aesthetically intricate or as ornamented as can be and in that way it inspires one to be a part of it by developing art for the walls. In this case, our campus' grey walls are merely understated. It is not that there is nothing there; it just doesn't necessarily inspire reflection on the environment. Concrete does not support ideas of sustainability or invoke

Figure. 1. Kolligian Library facing COB at UC Merced by Jordan Hindiyeh

passion for our environment, but we might buy in to our campus more if we recognized our environment and ourselves in it.

Sustainability has become a growing imperative in higher education. Institutions are responding to challenges related to a more global society such as issues of global justice, environment, survival, human rights, and citizenship. This is where we get the rationale for education for sustainability, and the University of California system has responded by requiring a common core class (*CORE Course Series*). Core promotes sustainability by discussing the drought in California – the effects are visible in these images from Yosemite – and other human-influenced causes of climate change. But we could do more to promote environmental sustainability. In their article, "The Challenges of Sustainability Education," Professors at St. Thomas University, Donovan McFarlane, Founder and Director of the Donovan Society, and Agueda Ogazon, Assistant Professor of Business Administration and Management, describe several colleges in the United States have already designed and implemented sustainability education "across the curriculum" (*Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 81). Both professors explain that many colleges are developing full-fledged degrees and other curriculum-related programs in sustainable business and practices (*Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 81). As UC Merced is an ever-expanding research institution, we are easily capable of implementing programs such as these. While the social and environmental seminars and speakers are a good start, they may not be enough to reach the whole student body.

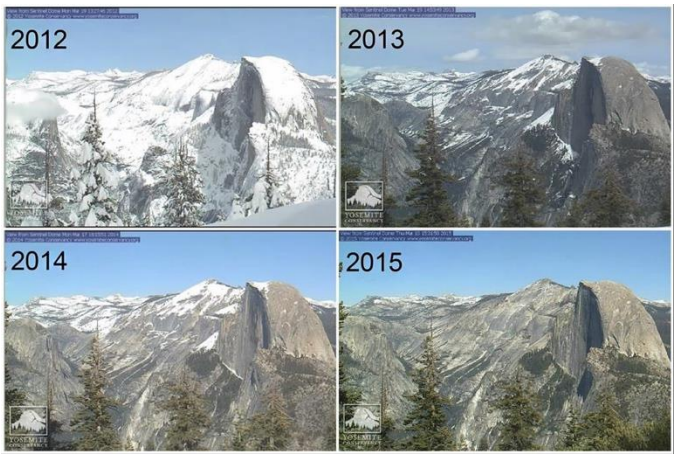

Figure. 2. Effect of Drought on Yosemite National Park, Yosemite Conservancy

Regardless of the challenges, UC Merced sees itself as the vital link to promote and advocate sustainability by making sustainability education as a part of its mission. As a micro-society, we seek to become truly sustainable. We aim to better our community as students and professors alike become wiser and more caring with regards towards our actions that affect living standards, quality of life, wildlife, the environment, peoples, and cultures. The extensive drought in California is one of the many climate change events we need to prepare for in the future if we continue our reliance on unsustainable forms of energy. We must promote lasting environmental awareness that has a real impact, starting with the students and our university. We do not wish to be a momentary movement on campus, but a real habit or way of living students adopt after college is over.

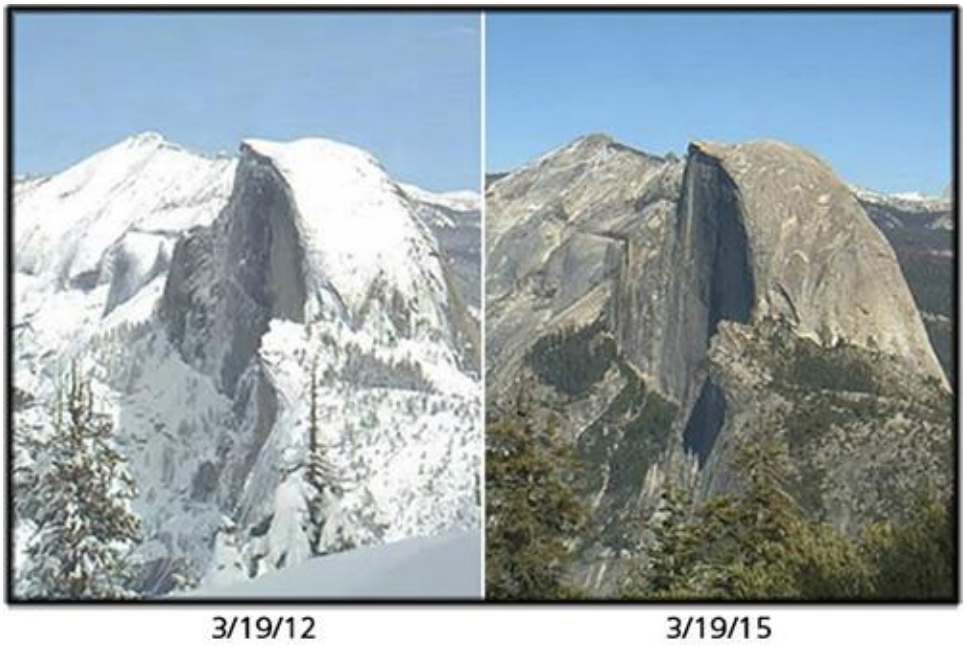

Figure. 3. Three Years of Drought in Yosemite, Yosemite National Park

Solution

Every semester students will collaborate to create student-led public service announcements that are both artistic and informative. These can be posters with facts, catchphrases, photographs, and paintings. We will not only cover these grey walls with color, but help to inspire other students to protect our Earth as well. UC Merced would be the first California University to commission and show student-led artwork focused on sustainability across campus every year. We will raise awareness and promote environmental sustainability.

These works of art will be located in areas around campus that students frequent that are also currently bare and not in areas that would interfere with the campus' ability to blend in with the surrounding environment. One example would be to paint a giant Sequoia, to scale, up the outer wall of the Kolligian Library facing COB. We would not be able to see most of the tree or experience it like we would in nature, but it would make others long to see it in real life, drawing their attention to our surroundings. Another example would be to show the positives and negatives of human interaction with the environment. A powerful image would need to express how we have damaged the health of our environment and ourselves as well as the positive aspects of humans living in harmony with our precious ecosystems. We could also display our gratitude for the quality of

Figure. 4. Sequoia Mural in Boston's North End, Nathan Swain

education we receive through a mural of prominent professors and students. Pictured here are professional and high school murals; they serve as examples of what our students will create in regards to themes promoting sustainability. These murals would be a way to show collective expression in appreciating our university and those that work and live in it. There could even be works of art that help the campus blend in with our surroundings and help to continually support our mission to reduce our reliance on nonrenewable resources.

Figure. 5. Santa Cruz High School Mural, Student Artists

People experience an emotional impact from art – this experience can stimulate them to take dignified and solemn action in a way scientific field measurements cannot. Jess Gerrior states in her 2013 article “What's The Best Formula For A Sustainable Campus?” that we need to embrace the strength of diversity among campus stakeholders and recognize the value of the campus itself as a living laboratory (*University Business* 78). A number of art programs are using art to bring further awareness to environmental practices. With this experiment, we will see sustainability efforts soar. We could offer inspiring prizes for the best works; the ones that make us care the most could receive a “Most Inspirational Award” or a free trip to Yosemite National Park for all of the winning artists.

Here at UC Merced, we pride ourselves in our multicultural background. We are the color, the lifeblood of the campus. This grey background does not represent us. This system must have the students leading the way. A student body will look over all submissions and pick the

best that represent us all in our fight against climate change. This project does not solve an environmental problem but brings up potential solutions and raises awareness. The mosaics hung up by painters tape on the third floor of COB are not indicative of our artistic potential. We can create more influential pieces of environmental art.

Figure. 6. Carson High School Mural, EnricoManiago

Administration and Organization

First, there will be a committee formed to steer the art projects. In order to be the most efficient as possible, a group of five students with the help of an art department advisor will decide which artwork will be used and where. These students can be volunteers. If there are more students interested, the student body can vote on who gets to work on it. The five students will work on two projects each year, or one per semester. Students will submit their artwork to this group and the group will vote on which piece best represents us all. Artists can recommend where they would like their work to be displayed or the group will decide its placement. From there, meetings will be held to set timelines, allocate a budget, and produce the artwork. It will be up to the committee to decide how the details of these tasks will happen. This is a chance for

students to test their skills and abilities; writing grants, negotiation, networking, creating partnerships, and research.

The artwork will meet the criteria in order to be considered sustainability-oriented by engaging at least one of these points:

- Promotes sustainable practices
- Contributes to creative expression and discussion about sustainability
- Describes the source, consequences, and solutions to local and/or global climate change
- Reflects on social and/or ecological issues
- Addresses societal change
- Displays where food, water, and energy come from and/or where waste goes
- Advocates for ethical action as responsible world citizens

Costs/Benefits

The committee will determine an estimated budget for each project. I foresee that the costs of each project should be, hopefully, no more than $1,000 per installation piece. The funds can be allocated for the following purposes:

1. Committee planning (cost associated with planning work, paying volunteers for costs incurred)
2. Art supplies, including exterior house paint (eco-friendly and biodegradable would be preferred)
3. Used vinyl billboards or large-scale printing (both can be found locally)
4. Installation of the works

The works can be painted on the ground and then hung up around campus. Art generates a love of learning and creativity, supports emotional intelligence, awakens the senses, and builds communities. Art allows for collaboration among many groups. These are active organizations on campus and in Merced County, all dedicated to inspiring and improving the community and can act as sources of possible funding and support:

Campus Activities Board (CAB)
Transportation and Parking Services (TAPS)
UC Merced Earth Club
Office of Student Life (OSL)
Sustainability Outreach Student Association (SOSA)
Hip Hop Movement (Graffiti section)
Student Alumni Association (SAA)
Associated Students of the University of California, Merced (ASUCM)
Community Research Initiative (CRI)
Recycling at UC Merced
Engineers for Sustainable World (ESW)
Fraternity & Sorority Live (FSL)
Humans United (HMNS UTD)
Multicultural Student Council (MCSC)
Arts UC Merced Presents
Merced County Arts Council
Merced Multicultural Arts Center
Professors Richard Gomez, Tonya Lopez-Craig, Lesha Rodriguez, and Anna Moncovich
Dean Jill Robbins, School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts

Problems/Risks

There are a number of obstacles for this project, which we need to consider. One, there are rules about painting on the concrete walls, so one way to circumvent that is to hang the work instead of painting directly onto concrete. Another problem is space for the artist(s) to work. As long as the decision-making and fundraising are completed on a timely basis, there should be no problem with completing the works on time. Any more or less than five students in the group will either put too much pressure on the group or it will be less efficient. Another issue is funds and motivation. Smaller projects are easier to do than large murals. We already have a small art gallery, so we can assume we do not want to build an entirely new one. We are using the existing structures to show the work, but each piece of artwork will need its own space to complete it. There could trouble finding funding and support from the community, but this project is something that many people and organizations would like to see accomplished.

Conclusion

We should strive to become a truly sustainable community as described by The Center for Ecoliteracy: alive – fresh, vital, evolving, diverse, dynamic. It supports the health and quality of life of present and future generations while living within the limits of its social and natural systems. It recognizes the need for justice, and for physical, emotional, intellectual, cultural, and spiritual sustenance (*Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 104). An image may not be particularly dramatic or beautiful, but it can inspire people to change their habits. If it can be used in practical ways to address climate change, why not cover our campus with art? People experience an emotional impact from art – this can stimulate them to take dignified and solemn action in a way scientific field measurements cannot. We will raise awareness and promote environmental sustainability as a life practice. With this experiment, we will see sustainability efforts soar, as well as a renewed appreciation for our university and what it stands for. Here at UC Merced, we pride ourselves in our multicultural background. This system must have the students leading the way; a student body of five will look over all submissions and pick the best that represent us all in our fight against climate change. Students are able to produce a wonderful product when given a budget and criteria.

This project does not solve an environmental problem but brings up potential solutions and raises awareness. Implementing this plan comes with many challenges, like finding support throughout the community and funding. Regardless of the challenges, we feel that incorporating sustainable art projects into our growing campus will be a worthwhile, inspirational endeavor.

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