

# Why Environmental Humanities?

By STEPHANIE KAZA

Ask any Environmental Studies major why they care about the environment and you will find a wide range of passions and philosophies. Many describe their motivation in poetic or spiritual terms; others feel a deep sense of calling or injustice. Still others can tell you the history of environmental influence in their families or significant teachers. Everyone has a story to tell, one that is filled with values, experience, reflection, and meaning. This is the terrain of the environmental humanities. In this field of study and scholarship, we consider ethical assumptions, cultural perspectives, and expressive approaches to environmental insight. We draw on the methods and skills of the humanities disciplines to raise questions often overlooked by scientific and economic approaches to problem-solving.

In October 2004, the UVM Environmental Program brought this topic to the attention of faculty colleagues in the Northeast Environmental Studies (NEES) group. During the first evening of the annual meeting we hosted a panel on this emerging but underdeveloped area of Environmental Studies. Across the country, science and policy, economics and social issues are all common topics for courses and scholarship in Environmental Studies programs. But the fields encompassed by the humanities are still absent in many schools. At UVM, in contrast, the humanities have flourished in Environmental Studies. We regularly offer courses in environmental humanities to meet a major requirement; these include *Religion and Ecology*, *Ecofeminism*, *Environmental Ethics*, *Environmental History*, as well as courses in environmental writing and art. Students have produced a number of innovative senior theses reflecting humanities themes.

## A Range of Perspectives

The NEES panel convened a number of people associated with the Program working in environmental humanities fields. **Ian Worley** represented perspectives from environmental ethics and philosophy; **Cami Davis**, environmental art; **David Massell**, environmental history; **Ibit Getchell**, writing and sense of place; **Hector Saez**, environmental justice; and **Stephanie Kaza**, religion and ecology and ecofeminism. **Adrian Ivakhiv**, who could not be there, also contributes to environmental humanities through his work in environment and culture. This wide range of experience and perspective is rare among Environmental Programs in the United States.

Because we are so fortunate to have developed these strengths in the humanities, it was a great pleasure to share our insights with NEES colleagues from all over New England and

beyond. We took this opportunity to try to articulate the role and need for humanities methods and perspectives in addressing environmental concerns. In planning the panel, Ian felt there could be useful reflection on how human ways of knowing and valuing are “created by, enhanced by, and communicated through literature, meditation, religious experience, moral dilemmas, concept formulation, and cultural tradition.”

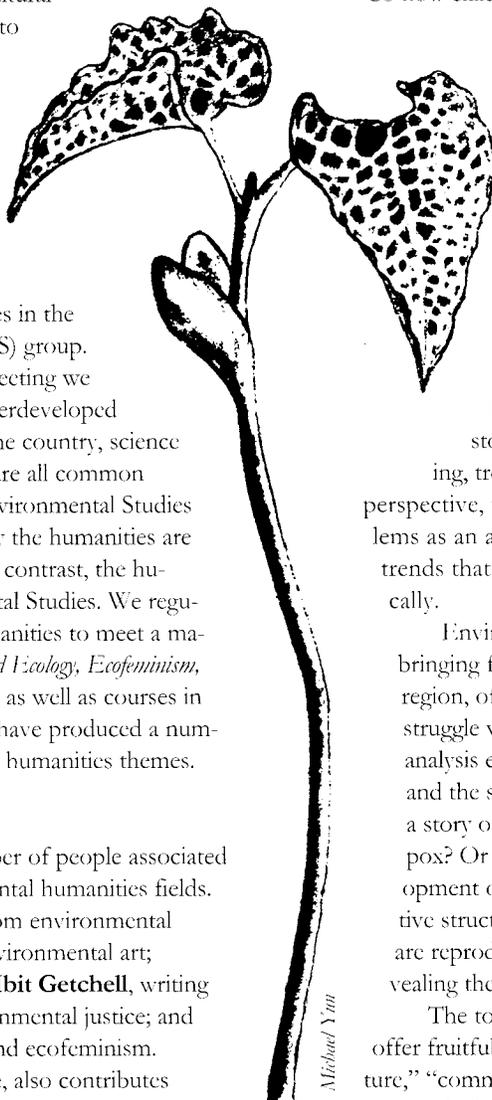
## The Various Fields of Thought

So how exactly do the environmental humanities expand our understanding of environmental problems and our capacities to address them? Let us take a brief look at the contributions of the various fields of thought to environmental work. Environmental history takes the role of the environment – weather, soils, climate, resources, geography—as central to human history. It offers a grounded view of the limitations and opportunities for human endeavor. It includes the evolution of change on the landscape through natural impacts (fire, ice storms, drought) and human impacts (grazing, tree plantations, dams). Taking a historical perspective, we can understand environmental problems as an accumulation of decisions, narratives, and trends that, even if disturbing, make sense historically.

Environmental literature also works with story, bringing forward individual experience of place and region, of encounters with environmental toxins, of struggle with environmental dilemmas. Literary analysis examines the role of the land in the story and the slant of the narrative in telling the story. Is it a story of conquest and war, as in eradicating small-pox? Or is it a narrative of heroism, as in the development of nuclear energy? By looking at the narrative structure, we can see how cultural perspectives are reproduced in relation to the environment, revealing the bias of the storyteller.

The tools of environmental philosophy and ethics offer fruitful discussion of such broad concepts as “nature,” “community,” “development.” Aldo Leopold, author of *The Land Ethic*, said that “We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in.” In the panel, Hector raised crucial issues around how we see poverty and privilege, and how cultures reproduce patterns of environmental racism.

“Religion and ecology” has developed rapidly as a field over the past ten years, bringing together the research methods and



central questions from religious studies to bear on environmental problems. In the *Religion and Ecology* course, students examine world religious traditions for their contributions to positive or negative beliefs and practices as they impact the land. The course asks, how do beliefs, moral standards, and doctrinal assumptions affect the way people treat the earth? How does revealed knowledge from a higher authority inform environmental behavior? Students see that religious views within various denominations are mixed in supporting stable environmental practices.

Art, music, dance, theater – all these disciplines work with human perception and expression. Cami, who teaches *Ecological Perception and Painting*, encourages students to work with a felt sense of inner response to land and water, sky, trees, animals. She asks them to listen to who is speaking in nature and what is being communicated, and then, as well, to study their own biases of perception as humans. Ibit spoke about how writing about places, landscapes and personal experience can be powerful for students as they touch some of their deepest yearnings for connection. Music has also become a medium of expression for a number of Environmental Studies majors, reflecting the powerful role of music to send cultural messages.

### Important Questions

In all these fields, the panel addressed crucial issues raised by the environmental humanities. What different ways of knowing influence perception and action? How do various intellectual frames shed light on different aspects of environmental problems? How are teachers and researchers influenced by ethical motivation, moral training, or experience in the arts as they

undertake their academic work? Each person on the panel noted the shortcomings of environmental science and policy to provide all the answers or to achieve significant environmental behavioral change. Certainly these fields are foundational to analyzing the scope and impacts of any given environmental problem. But human values tend to drive political and economic decisions and thus need to be addressed as part of environmental interdisciplinary thinking.

Taking up the methods and perspectives of the humanities, one might ask: What will move people to change environmentally-destructive behaviors? What are the social and political incentives and disincentives for carrying out environmental problem-solving? What modes of expression will be convincing enough to penetrate the media-dominated psyche of American culture? These are difficult and challenging questions. But to judge from the audience response to the NEES panel, they are questions we ought to take up. Thus UVM's Environmental Program should be in the forefront offering fresh insight from the environmental humanities, and encouraging other programs to incorporate this work into their courses and research. 🌱



The Little Beans: Michael Yoon

## 2005 ENVS Humanities Theses: A Sampler

**Kari Holman** – *Art as an Ecological Practice: Paintings of Connectedness*. Kari created three series of paintings that grew out of her artistic practice of ritual observation, meditation, and field journaling at Centennial Woods, Shelburne Orchards, and Bingham Falls. Her artwork was left out in the elements of each area, literally creating a collaboration between herself and the natural world and honoring the place and her connection to it.

**Kelsey Cornelius** – *Gastronomic Piety: Sustainable Food in the American Christian Tradition*. Kelsey explored sustainable food practices in American Christian traditions. She surveyed over 600 congregations of Mennonites, Presbyterians, Catholics and Unitarian Universalists, and found significant gaps in sustainability practices.

**Tiffany Shaw** – *Cottongrass Fen: An Exploration of Understanding Place*. Tiffany sought to understand a wetland complex in Westford, Vermont, adjacent to her home. Her approach was multi-faceted, combining natural history, ecological data, journal entries, prose, poetry, and beautiful photography.

**Sarah Hagerman** – *Back Roads, Back Yards, and Road Songs: A Novella*. Sarah wrote about the opposite of sense of place, sense of placelessness. With a protagonist who spent her entire life in transit, Sarah explored how this experience, common in western culture, could still form the basis for an environmental consciousness.

**Lowell Bailey** – *Songs of Logging: A Composition of Original Historical Interpretive Music Based on the History of Adirondack Logging*. Lowell drew on his accomplished musical skills and knowledge of Adirondack history to compose and record seven original songs. Significant historical analysis accompanied each thoughtful and energetic composition.

**Todd Winner** – *Approaching an Apple Tree: The Foundations of Form and Function in the Natural Landscape*. Todd's thesis, grounded in philosophy, showed how different philosophical approaches can be applied to earth's natural resources. To illustrate each approach, ranging from idealism to socialism to existentialism, he used an apple tree as a focus, supplementing his essays with clever photographs.