

RSENR Strategic Plan Summary

Background

The Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources (RSENR) has undertaken a scenario planning process to identify robust strategies to guide bold thinking for the school well into the future. The process allowed the school community to identify the drivers of change reshaping the future of environment and natural resource higher education and research; to develop a set of relevant and insightful scenarios; and to apply the scenarios in creating a desired future vision and set of robust strategies to guide RSENR on a path toward that desired vision. The scenario planning process allowed the school to stretch beyond conventional wisdom and to collectively engage its faculty, staff, students, and board of advisors in the strategic planning process. The result was a set of strategies that are the collective product of the strategic thinking of the RSENR community.

Scenario planning is a strategy methodology employed by many organizations and communities to test their long-term assumptions and explore the uncertain landscape of their future environment. Areas of uncertainty become the building blocks of scenarios. The resultant scenarios become the context in which the organization plans. This Strategic Plan is the culmination of that scenario planning process.

Executive Summary

Humanity faces a time of urgency with science under attack and humanity and the planet facing complex challenges that require a new world view in how to address these challenges. With RSENR's distinctive interdisciplinary approach to research and education, its interdisciplinary faculty, experiential hands-on learning model, place-based education, community and social and environmental justice imperative, the school is uniquely positioned to play a role in healing and radically changing human-environment systems in a just, equitable and ecologically informed manner. To that end, RSENR explored the following core strategic question through the scenario planning process: *How can RSENR unleash empathy, passion, innovation and creativity to heal and radically change the human-environment systems in a just equitable and ecological direction?*

In answering this question, RSENR identified the following set of core strategies that are foundational to its Strategic Plan:

- **Change the narrative to be increasingly biocentric, just, and equitable.**
- **Focus research on human-environment health and balance.**
- **Create an expanding, inclusive, life-long impactful learning experience and community.**
- **Reframe and harness technology to overcome barriers to radical change.**
- **Collaborate to expand and redefine expertise, leverage networks, and reach globally.**
- **Prepare RSENR to embrace and create change – Change by design.**
- **Create time spaciousness.**

Mission (working version – drawn from strategic focus)

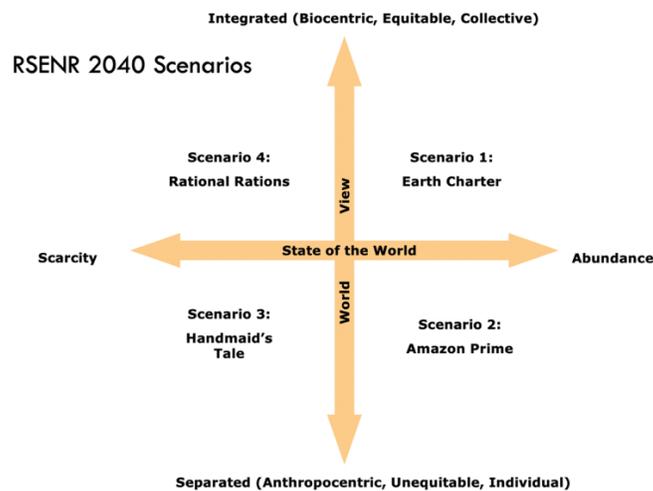
To heal and radically change the human-environment systems in a just, equitable and ecological direction through its education and research.

Vision (working version – drawn from Scenario 1)

A biocentric, just and equitable future in harmony with nature and the environment.

RSENR 2040 Scenarios – Strategic Implications for the Future

Scenarios are stories about the future. Scenario thinking encourages an organization to challenge deeply held assumptions and to chart a clear path forward through difficult and uncertain times. The unknown forces that shape an entity’s external environment are called “critical uncertainties” and form the foundation on which scenarios are created. The future will never be exactly as described in any one scenario but will be made up of components of all the scenarios that are created. Based on the input and work of the RSENR faculty, staff, board of advisors and students the following set of scenarios were developed:



Relevant Critical Uncertainties Found in the RSENR Scenarios:

Human Relationship with the Natural / Living World	Future Generations of Leaders and Scientists
Societal Agency to Address Complex Challenges	Learning Models
Education (Higher Education Access, Affordability, Funding, and Delivery)	Research Approach and Resources
Public Perception of Science	UVM
Government Role and Influence	Complex Challenges (Climate Change)
Equity, Diversity, Inclusion in Science and Education	

The following are brief descriptions of each scenario and the strategic implications of each for RSENR:

Scenario 1 “Earth Charter”: This is a scenario in which a youth uprising brings about radical change to address the issues of climate change and the imbalanced relationship of humans with the Earth that creates global alliances and improved wellbeing. RSENR can play a role in enabling the full potential of biocentric thinking and understanding to reshape the relationship of humans with the environment and Earth by being a learning organization, leveraging strong iterative feedback and support in a culture that elevates and acknowledges the value of all members of the community, increasing individual and collective autonomy to be nimble and adaptive. As such, RSENR can become a hub of humane, empathetic, and ecological knowledge resources and technological capabilities to train learners and decision makers to radically change how humans perceive their role and act in the living, ecological world. This highly global, connected world requires RSENR to expand international research and internship opportunities to actively include community participation which in turn will provide growing understanding of the environment and natural resources and attract life-long learners to engage with the school. Efforts would be made to radically redesign the recruiting approach based on a new set of valued characteristics of a learner. To fully realize its potential in this scenario, RSENR should create systems, structures, accountability methods to enable time spaciousness for students, faculty and staff including, flexible learning timelines, peer-to-peer and traditional mentoring, the achievement of work-life balance, deeper reflection and learning, self-care such that time becomes a resource of abundance within RSENR.

Scenario 2 “Amazon Prime”: This is a scenario in which corporate intervention leads to planetary management that engineers a Prime existence for its members. The key strategy for RSENR in this scenario is integrating affordability and access to explore coupled human-environment systems with an increasingly diverse faculty for both research and learning programs and enhanced collaboration at multiple scales. This scenario requires RSENR to become increasingly engaged with corporations and the private sectors and to work to align the private sectors with understanding and accepting the increased value and potential of a more just, equitable, and ecologically informed approach that is inclusive of all. This will require the research of human systems to explicitly link health, economic and innovation value of diversity to economic and environmental success measures as well as improved wellbeing. With the strong focus on leveraging human ingenuity and engineering to solve complex problems, RSENR can proactively work to integrate ecosystem services and biomimicry into STEM and engineering approaches. This strategy begins with aligning with and building relationships with socially responsible, innovators in the private sector as key strategic partners. RSENR must also reshape its experiential learning models for self-directed, life-long learners for learners who want to shape their own curriculum and bridging online and in-person learning creatively.

Scenario 3 “Handmaid’s Tale”: This is a scenario in which order is administered by authoritarian government that squeezes what it can from Earth in a quest to figure out humanity’s next steps. In this scenario, RSENR can advocate for nature and biodiversity as essential for the

future of humanity, with a clear narrative linking nature and biodiversity to medicines, food and water security for health and wellbeing. RSENR can build on its interdisciplinary approach and natural science to move to an ecologically informed public striving to live in harmony with the environment. This would require radical inclusion of different ways of knowing including indigenous wisdom and knowledge to facilitate over time a paradigm restoration. Reciprocal community and service learning would be engrained in the curriculum. RSENR would start with support the learning elites and the masses and work to bring both groups into one, inclusive, lifelong learning resource model.

Scenario 4 “Rational Rations”: This is a scenario in which the world around us begins to crumble, people put aside petty differences and work to protect what is left. In this scenario, RSENR would focus on repurposing and investing in technology to seamlessly tie the remote, virtual learning experience to tie with place-based education and research. The result would be the opportunity to bring in more voices and perspectives into both teaching and research. The community is an integral part of the RSENR learning and research community in a strong reciprocal relationship with the school itself such that there would be shared goal setting and collaboration. This collaborative work would also strive to breakdown barriers between various institutions to bring all of the relevant sectors into a joint solutions space. RSENR would focus on developing a lifelong learning path that offers milestones and pathways that can be individualized by the learner. This scenario requires a strong sense of empathy, passion and awareness that is best unleashed through inclusion of arts and humanities into the curriculum. All of this requires RSENR to develop a culture and environment that embraces change.

In considering the strategic implications of the RSENR 2040 scenarios, the RSENR community then identified a set of core and enabling strategies made up of robust strategies that work across the full set of scenarios and game changing strategies. This set of strategies works as a systemic set of actions in response to RSENR’s strategic focal question on how to heal and radically change human-environment systems in a just, equitable, and ecologically informed manner.

Core Strategies

Core strategies are the primary strategies underpinning the RSENR Strategic Plan.

- **Change the narrative to be increasingly biocentric, just, and equitable.**
RSENR needs to change the narrative around how humans interact with the environment and within the environment to be increasingly biocentric and ecologically driven. The core of this narrative is to create a clear ecosystem reality that focuses on the criticality of healthy ecosystems, nature and biodiversity as essential for human health and wellbeing. The narrative draws the connections between balanced human activity with ecosystems, nature and biodiversity leads to secure and abundant medicine, food, water and fuel. This narrative impacts what is researched and content for learning. It begs a repurposing of technology advances for ecological sustainability.

- Focus research on human-environment health and balance.**
 In order to change the narrative and set the stage for healing and radical change, RSENR must focus on applied, collaborative, sustainable research focused on supporting human and environment health. This approach will also mean a growing focus on solutions and impact in response to the challenges impacting human-environment health. Applied, collaborative and solutions-oriented research must be reciprocal research and fully engage the community in the research process, insight gathering, and solutions development.
- Create an expanding, inclusive, life-long impactful learning experience and community.**
 This strategy requires intentional and critical design of programs to ensure they fully embrace and facilitate inclusion, diversity and equity and are reciprocal in nature. To expand the learning community, RSENR will focus on life-long learning and radically transforming the recruitment process by expanding what is valued and desired in future learners. Focusing on accessibility and affordability for all learners to make learning increasingly equitable and just. This will require a redesign of the learning experience, seamlessly intertwining online, place-based, hands-on and service-learning opportunities to create a robust and rich learning experience. Learners of the future will be increasingly life-long learners and will not be bound by time-defined processes and degree programs. Rather, RSENR must of prepare for a more flexible learning portfolio that includes micro-credentials to support life-long learning. This new portfolio will transform learning delivery and cost structures thus positively impacting access and affordability.
- Collaborate to expand and redefine expertise, leverage networks, and reach globally.**
 This strategy is key to RSENR being able to build adaptability, multiple ways of knowing and empathy. RSENR must expand and deepen collaboration, leverage networks, and build relationships to further excellence and innovation in research and education. In order for RSENR to expand and redefine expertise, it must apply interdisciplinary collaboration and forge new partnerships to enrichen who is engaged thus increasingly the capacity of RSENR both individually and collectively to be increasingly adaptive, nimble, and resilient.

The RSENR community must focus on building psychological and interrelationship skills including shared power, team building, communications, intercultural competence, multiple ways of knowing and facilitation in its professional development and curriculum development. Arts and humanities and creativity and expression are critical pathways to wellbeing and unleashing empathy. RSENR must work to have a global presence to apply in all aspects of research and education programs and to assist with networking, research and recruitment of lifelong learners and contributors.

Enabling Strategies

Enabling strategies are the strategies that enable successful implementation of the core strategies. Without these enabling strategies RSENR would be unable to successfully implement its core strategies.

- **Reframe and harness technology to overcome barriers to radical change.**
RSENR must embrace technological tools that facilitate and encourage interaction across space and time. This requires investment in staff, faculty, and students acquiring tech skills to optimally use and apply technology. RSENR must fully adopt open technology, artificial intelligence and open data.
- **Prepare RSENR to embrace and create change – Change by design.**
RSENR must apply approaches to allow people to be adaptive and open to change, breaking down barriers to change. Fostering change by design through the application of best practices in change management. Breaking down barriers to collaboration, to resource sharing and the application of open data and open science can revolutionize how work is done and people interact within the school.
- **Create time spaciousness.**
With RSENR's current challenges of being understaffed and with growing emphasis on playing an increasing active role in changing the narrative and unleashing radical change within the school, university and in human-environment systems of the broader world, creating time spaciousness within RSENR is game changing. RSENR must consider how to apply nontraditional timelines for students, faculty and staff. How can RSENR apply technology to create on-demand fluid timing for individuals and the collective? How does the way time and work is constructed create obstacles and further inequity? What can be done to reimagine work and learning to create time spaciousness and build flexibility and resilience within the school?