

Environment, Image, and Notre Dame

Notre Dame has entered a new era of environmental stewardship, signaled by a new Office of Sustainability, the recent Forum on that topic, and a serious recycling program energized by student participation. Efforts to recycle wastes, to conserve electricity, and to install energy-efficient equipment are commendable and should be continued. But such efforts are quantitative (how many pounds recycled?) rather than qualitative, and are already commonplace among ND's peer institutions. To assume a position of environmental leadership, ND will have to make qualitative changes as well. A few suggestions follow, under the headings (1) Policy and Planning, (2) Instruction, and (3) Campus Life.

POLICY AND PLANNING

Power Generation During the 1990s, as reported in the most recent *Scholastic* (9/18/08), ND's coal-burning power plant was in violation of the Clean Air Act, resulting in a large fine by the EPA. Rather than rest content that no fines have been levied since then, the University should seriously consider shifting to less polluting forms of energy. Reliance on clean energy might involve extra expense initially but certainly would reduce ND's ecological footprint.

Ecological Footprint The concept of carbon footprint is now established in public awareness. But carbon emissions are not the only burden the University places on our beleaguered environment. Others are the ozone-depleting halogens released in manufacturing the hundreds of computers we buy annually, toxic chemicals applied by factory farms providing food for our dining halls, and nonbiodegradable plastics used in many aspects of campus life. These all contribute to the University's total ecological

footprint. An environmentally alert institution would strive to keep a complete tally of its ecological footprint and would take serious steps to keep it at a minimum.

Avoiding Need to Recycle A better policy than simply recycling is one of avoiding materials that *require* recycling. A few examples of things to avoid are glossy reports issued by centers and institutes, single-use manila envelopes containing routine notices, and vending machines selling things in plastic bottles. The University's goal in this regard should be to recycle as little as possible while at the same time recycling everything that needs it.

INSTRUCTION

Course Offerings All undergraduates at ND should have opportunity to take a full-credit course exploring humankind's tenuous relation to the rest of the biosphere. For students in some disciplines, such a course should be required. One possibility is to make environmental instruction part of a mandatory Freshman Seminar. The format of such an offering should be broad enough to be taught through any department that chooses to participate.

Learning by Doing ND students learn about social issues by participating in programs sponsored by the Center for Social Concerns. The University should consider establishing a similar center to help students learn about environmental issues. Such a center could set up cooperative arrangements with near-by organic farms, could arrange internships with state and federal environmental agencies, and could train students to provide assistance to businesses concerned with their ecological footprints.

A Demonstration Ecosystem In most learning situations, doing and observing go hand in hand. Before its property is all taken up by buildings, the University should set aside

20 to 30 acres on which to enable a self-sufficient ecosystem (an “ecopark”) of native woodlands, meadows, and wetlands. Once established, this demonstration ecosystem would be kept mostly free from human management. While the area would be available for field trips by appropriate groups, its main purpose would be to provide students a place to “commune with nature” and thereby to learn more about how nature works.

STUDENT LIFE

Consuming Less Consuming less water and less electricity in dorms is a good beginning. A good continuation would be to reduce dependency on environmentally damaging consumer items like red meat and bottled drinks. A side benefit is that cutting back on beef and giving up soda pop is good for one’s health. Other consumer items that could be cut back include fashionable clothing (e.g. The Shirt) and video games.

Living without Cars Few modern conveniences contribute more to a heavy ecological footprint than private automobiles. On a truly green campus, people would limit use of cars to occasions of genuine need. Walking, riding bicycles, and taking buses are adequate for most purposes. ND students should take pride in cutting reliance on automobiles to a bare minimum.

Life-style changes To help ND gain preeminence in environmental stewardship, its student body will have to go beyond recycling and turning off light switches – beyond even avoiding red meat and forswearing soda pop. Concerned students will want to adopt life-styles devoted to “walking lightly on the earth.” This includes living simply (minimum use of devices run by motors), reducing material needs (fewer trips to the mall), and becoming more aware of other creatures (listening to birds rather than ipods).

With examples like these in its midst, the University could learn from its students and assume leadership in its witness of environmental values.