

Carly Dickson  
The History of Environmental Studies: At Bowdoin and Beyond  
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## **Introduction**

Today, Environmental Studies is seen as an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary field which investigates the interaction between humans and their environment by integrating principles across the humanities, social sciences, and physical sciences. Environmental studies aims to break down complex environmental issues by looking at them through multiple different perspectives.<sup>1</sup> Although Environmental Studies programs exist at many institutions of higher education today, the development of these programs in the United States didn't start until after World War II as the result of growing popular environmentalist attitudes.

Ultimately, the origins of Environmental Studies started with changing ideologies on how Americans viewed their role in the natural world. Economic growth led to increased concerns for environmental degradation and its impact on human well-being, changing public values and demands concerning the environment. Societal pressures and environmentalist movements pushed colleges and universities towards declarations of sustainable action. As higher education moved toward environmental education, it faced challenges with the structure and curriculum of Environmental Studies programs and the boundless content of the field. Environmentalist movements continued to develop and modify their goals and purpose, prompting Environmental Studies programs to change with them. As the field of environmental Studies expanded, programs at institutions grew in numbers and distinction, eventually shifting away from local-based problems towards targeting environmental issues at a global scale.

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<sup>1</sup> Caldwell, Lynton K. "Environmental Studies: *Discipline or Metadiscipline?*" *Environmental Professional* 5, no. 3-4 (January 1, 1983): 247-59.

## Part 1: Environmental Studies in the United States

The post-war push towards environmental education was largely a result in shifting ideologies on how we perceive our natural world. Academics have long studied nature and aspects of the natural world from a purely scientific perspective. However, the term “environment” was seldom used preceding World War II.<sup>2</sup> A 1972 article titled “The New Concept of the Environment” articulates nature as something which is “out there” compared to the environment, which humans are seen as part of.<sup>3</sup> Proponents of Environmental Studies programs saw that separating humans from nature would reinforce environmentally irresponsible behavior.<sup>4</sup> The understanding that the natural world is something humans have influence within eventually contributed to academic shifts from “environmental science” to Environmental Studies”.

Environmental science is a discipline rooted in the physical sciences as they apply to the natural world. Prior to the development of Environmental Studies, many universities offered programs that could be categorized as environmental science such as ecology, geology, and geography. Courses of this manner can be described as studies “of the environment” rather than studies “for the environment”.<sup>5</sup> It wasn’t until the late 1960s and 1970s that environmental education started to incorporate other disciplines such as sociology, economics, political science, and more.<sup>6</sup> With this influx of new perspectives on studying the environment, movement

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<sup>2</sup> Hays, Samuel P. “From Conservation to Environment: Environmental Politics in the United States Since World War Two.” *Environmental Review: ER* 6, no. 2 (1982): 14–41.

<sup>3</sup> Laszlo, Ervin. “The New Concept of the Environment.” *The Journal of Environmental Education* 3, no.3 (1972):14-17.

<sup>4</sup> Chapman, Robert L. “How to Think about Environmental Studies.” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 41, no. 1 (2007): 59–74.

<sup>5</sup> Marsden, William E. “Environmental Education: Historical Roots, Comparative Perspectives, and Current Issues in Britain and the United States.” *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 13, no. 1 (January 1, 1997): 6–29..

<sup>6</sup> Schoenfeld, A. Clay. “The University-Environmental Movement Marriage.” *The Journal of Higher Education* 50, no. 3 (1979): 289–309.

towards a study “for the environment” gained momentum. Contrary to Environmental Science, Environmental Studies developed out of popular environmentalist movements and served as an integrating link between pre-existing disciplines.<sup>7</sup>

The rise of environmentalism is a prominent aspect of post-war societal changes. Originally, environmental concerns were largely focused on concerns over conservation of physical resources, especially during the war when efficient management of resources was of primary concern.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, conservation efforts were largely led by state and government leaders, not by popular support. This top-down environmentalism is vastly different than post-war environmentalism which was largely led by popular environmentalist movements.<sup>9</sup> After World War II, the United States faced a period of rapid economic growth which included the development of a large middle class. During this time, there was also a shift in public values towards environmental protection. From the development of the Green party in the 1960s to the first Earth Day in 1970, the public began to express their demands for making environmentally conscious decisions.<sup>10</sup>

Bottom-up environmental movements extended beyond concentration on conservation and preservation. As industries grew during the post-war period of economic growth, so too did public fear of pollution and economic degradation from excessive industrial waste.<sup>11</sup> In part, fear of pollution is tied to a new fixation on health and quality of living. People began to see the environment as intertwined with their health and wellbeing and started to protest pollution and

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<sup>7</sup> Marsden, “Environmental Education.”

<sup>8</sup> Schoenfeld, “The University-Environmental Movement Marriage.”

<sup>9</sup> Hays, “From Conservation to Environment.”

<sup>10</sup> Schoenfeld, “The University-Environmental Movement Marriage.”

<sup>11</sup> Caldwell, Lynton K. “Environmental Studies: *Discipline or Metadiscipline?*” *Environmental Professional* 5, no. 3–4 (January 1, 1983): 247–59.

other environmental issues.<sup>12</sup> Fears of pollution and environmental degradation arose at both a national and local level. In 1962, Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* opened the public eye to the dangers of pesticide usage, creating a national outcry over concerns for public health. On a different scale, local events such as the Santa Barbara oil spill in 1969 inspired local environmental attitudes which eventually led to the development of UCSB's Environmental Studies program in 1970.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the growing middle class experienced increased income after the war and an increase in leisure time. As leisure time increased, so did activities such as hiking and camping. Americans began to view the environment as having potential for leisure and recreation, an attitude that may also have contributed to growing environmentalist values.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, increased time spent outdoors lead to greater opportunity for observations of threats to the natural environment.

As people shifted to environmentalist ideologies, institutions of higher education were forced to consider their own environmental impact. Human beings were at the center of environmental concerns, viewing human health and wellbeing as dependent on the environment. As leaders in teaching and research, there was pressure on colleges and universities to be leaders of environmental sustainability, resulting in the early development of Environmental Studies programs.<sup>15</sup> Although data shows that growth of Environmental Studies starting in the late 1960s and 1970s, it does not have a big surge in growth until later in the 1990s.<sup>16</sup> In part, Cold War tensions which saw Environmental Studies as "not authentically science" delayed development

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<sup>12</sup> Prof. Hans van Ginkel. *Thematic Debate: Preparing for a Sustainable Future: Higher Education and Sustainable Human Development*. Paris: UNESCO, 1998

<sup>13</sup> Making an Impact: A look at Santa Barbara's active role in the environmental movement and the influence of the Environmental Studies Department on its 30th anniversary, by Eric Simmons, *Daily Nexus* (May 19, 2000)

<sup>14</sup> Hays, "From Conservation to Environment."

<sup>15</sup> Hans van Ginkel. "Thematic Debate."

<sup>16</sup> John Frank, David, Karen Jeong Robinson, and Jared Olesen. "The Global Expansion of Environmental Education in Universities." *Comparative Education Review* 55, no. 4 (2011): 546–73.

of some Environmental Studies programs.<sup>17</sup> As federal grants were given to institutions for science and math research, it was more advantageous for most universities to focus on these disciplines. Outside of political pressures, universities struggled with the structure of Environmental Studies programs given the expansive content the field presents.

Since the start, proponents of Environmental Studies have had conflicting ideas over what content and objectives to include.<sup>18</sup> For some institutions, Environmental Studies meant slapping an “environmental label” onto existing programs to appease public demands.<sup>19</sup> Such programs were truly environmental science programs that dabbled in the social sciences. Development of these pseudo-ES programs largely resulted from the lack of institutional resources necessary to hire faculty, create courses, and develop curriculum that covered the full scope of Environmental Studies. Other institutions heavily deliberated what was needed to successfully teach environmental education.<sup>20</sup> Since every aspect of human economy, politics, and culture can be related to the environment, the field has no bounds in terms of what content can be considered as part of “Environmental Studies”. Thus, institutions struggled to cover environmental topics with the depth of a normal discipline.<sup>21</sup> The depth of Environmental Studies lead to widespread usage of an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approach. While many successful programs were interdisciplinary from the start, Environmental Studies has grown to incorporate a greater diversity of disciplines as our knowledge of the field grows.

One notable development within Environmental Studies is the growth of concerns over climate change. Today, climate change is one of the most pressing issues brought up in

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<sup>17</sup> Marsden, “Environmental Education.”

<sup>18</sup> Soulé, Michael E., and Daniel Press. “What Is Environmental Studies?” *BioScience* 48, no. 5 (1998): 397–405.

<sup>19</sup> Maniates, Michael F., and John C. Whissel. “Environmental Studies: The Sky is Not Falling.” *BioScience* 50, no. 6 (June 2000): 509-517

<sup>20</sup> Maniates and Whissel. “Environmental Studies: The Sky is Not Falling.”

<sup>21</sup> Soulé & Press. “What Is Environmental Studies?”

environmental fields. However, during early environmental movements, climate change was a scarcely mentioned concern among the general public.<sup>22</sup> The timing of boosts in concerns for climate change falls primarily after the first proliferation in Environmental Studies programs and is more in line with the second proliferation in the 1990s. It wasn't until 1987 that the United States signed the Climate protection act, prompting the EPA to develop policies on greenhouse gases and fossil fuel usage.<sup>23</sup> The salience of climate change issues played a role in shifting Environmental Studies programs from a local to a global scale. It may have also played a role in the large amount of program development in the 1990s, as pressing climate concerns pushed colleges and universities to address these issues. Climate change continues to be a primary target of Environmental Studies programs today.

## **Part 2: Environmental Studies at Bowdoin**

In the spring of 1966, John McKee, Director of Bowdoin's Center for Resource Studies, held an exhibition with photographs he had taken along the coast of Maine depicting the degradation and privatization of Maine's shorelines.<sup>24</sup> In a catalog of these images, an explanation for the somber photos is described, "...for the coast is fast being stripped of all that made it unique. Scarcely a mile of it is protected from exploitation."<sup>25</sup> Later in the same year, a group of twenty-two speakers traveled to Bowdoin to discuss threats to shorelines across the nation.<sup>26</sup> Inspired by the symposium, McKee and the Bowdoin Center for Resource Studies

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<sup>22</sup> Hecht, AlanD., and Dennis Tirpak. "Framework agreement on climate change: a scientific and policy history." *Climate Change* 29 (1995), 371-402.

<sup>23</sup> Hecht and Tirpak. "Framework agreement on climate change: a scientific and policy history."

<sup>24</sup> John McKee, "As Maine Goes: Photographs by John McKee", 1966, Bowdoin College Museum of Art, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections & Archives. Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

<sup>25</sup> John McKee, "As Maine Goes: Photographs by John McKee", 1966.

<sup>26</sup> Center for Resource Studies, "The Maine Coast: Time of Decision", 1967, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections & Archives. Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

published their book *The Maine Coast: Time of Decision*. After describing the dangers that development posed to Maine's coast and its dire need for protection, McKee concludes the book stating "What's needed now above all is to sit down and make some firm decisions, and then to act. We won't have as good a chance again, ever."<sup>27</sup>

McKee's call to sit and make decisions was answered on January 4, 1972, when the Special Committee on Environmental Studies introduced their first proposal for an Environmental Studies program at Bowdoin.<sup>28</sup> The committee had been in existence for over two years, first as an informal group and then later as a special committee composed of five faculty members and three undergraduates in 1970.<sup>29</sup> One of the tasks of the committee was to develop interdisciplinary courses that would lend themselves to the long-term development of an Environmental Studies program.<sup>30</sup> The first course was proposed by the committee in February 1971 and was titled "The Androscoggin" after the nearby river.<sup>31</sup> The course was proposed as a problem-centered upper level course in which students with strong skills in alternative disciplines could offer diverse perspectives on solving a local environmental problem. The main reason given for a problem-centered design over a general topic was to promote an interdisciplinary approach. The course was offered for the first time in the fall of 1971 in a similar manner as proposed with lectures of faculty from different disciplines aimed at studying

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<sup>27</sup> Center for Resource Studies, "The Maine Coast: Time of Decision", 1967.

<sup>28</sup> "Report of the Special Committee on Environmental Studies", 4 January 1972, Volume 3, Faculty: Records, Minutes, and Reports, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections & Archives. Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

<sup>29</sup> "Committees of the Faculty", 1970-1971, Volume 11, Faculty: Records, Minutes, and Reports, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections & Archives. Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

<sup>30</sup> Bowdoin College, "Bowdoin College Catalogue (1971-1972)" (1972). Bowdoin College Catalogues, Course Guides, and Academic Handbooks. 253.

<sup>31</sup> "Androscoggin Course Proposal", 15 February 1971, Volume 3, Faculty: Records, Minutes, and Reports, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections & Archives. Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

the Androscoggin basin from political, historical, biological, and economic viewpoints.<sup>32</sup> During its first offering, the course had just 16 students enrolled.<sup>33</sup>

Throughout the first two years of their existence, the Environmental Studies Committee debated several ways to add Environmental Studies to Bowdoin's curriculum.<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, the only approaches deemed satisfactory and feasible in terms of resources involved modeling the program after those of neighboring institutions. The committee ultimately chose to model the program after William's coordinate program over Colby's Environmental Studies major which was built out of existing courses. Courses that dealt with aspects of environmental problems already existed within the Bowdoin curriculum. A survey conducted in the fall of 1970 found that environmentally relevant courses or courses that could easily incorporate environmental perspectives already existed within ten departments: Art, Biology, Economics, Chemistry, Geology, Government, History, Mathematics, Physics, and Sociology.<sup>35</sup> In addition to existing courses relevant to environmental science, the committee proposed the addition of an Introductory Environmental Studies course along with an interdisciplinary seminar on Environmental Policy.<sup>36</sup> Offered for the first time during the 1972-73 school year, a high level of interest was shown for these new courses with almost 60 enrollments in Introductory Environmental Studies alone.<sup>37</sup>

The timing of Bowdoin's Environmental Studies program coincides with the beginning of the first wave of proliferation. After the proposal, Environmental Studies shows up in the

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<sup>32</sup> Bowdoin College, "Bowdoin College Catalogue (1971-1972)"

<sup>33</sup> Bowdoin College, "Report of the President, Bowdoin College 1971-1972" (1972). Annual Report of the President.

<sup>34</sup> "Report of the Special Committee on Environmental Studies", 4 January 1972.

<sup>35</sup> "Androscoggin Course Proposal", 15 February 1971.

<sup>36</sup> "Report of the Special Committee on Environmental Studies", 4 January 1972.

<sup>37</sup> Bowdoin College, "Report of the President, Bowdoin College 1972-1973" (1973). Annual Report of the President.



College Catalogue as coordinate major for the first time in 1972.<sup>38</sup> To complete the major, students were required to finish a major in an existing department in addition to completing a program of approved environmental courses. The rationale for the coordinate major was that the objective of an Environmental Studies Program required "...a program of studies which will allow the prospective environmental specialist to prepare himself for further study at the graduate level, or to enter into meaningful employment after graduation with the Bachelor's degree."<sup>39</sup> Since Environmental Studies was considered a relatively new course of study across the nation, graduate students in the field came from backgrounds in traditional majors rather than purely from Environmental Studies. Thus, in order to ensure future career and academic prospects of students, the committee deemed a full course of study in another department necessary.

From its development, Environmental Studies at Bowdoin saw tremendous growth and expansion. A faculty report in 1973 described "extensive interest among students and faculty in secondary schools" towards Bowdoin's program.<sup>40</sup> Although most of the program's early years were dedicated to maintenance rather than expansion, a motion to hire a faculty member to teach the introductory course as a full-time duty was approved in 1977.<sup>41</sup> Prior to this, the introductory course and interdisciplinary seminars had been taught by faculty from other departments. Despite being a program rather than a department, allocation of resources towards Environmental Studies faculty reflected the rising interest in the program's offerings. The first Environmental Studies

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<sup>38</sup> Bowdoin College, "Bowdoin College Catalogue (1972-1973)" (1973). Bowdoin College Catalogues, Course Guides, and Academic Handbooks. 254.

<sup>39</sup> "Report of the Special Committee on Environmental Studies", 4 January 1972.

<sup>40</sup> "For the Committee on Environmental Studies", 8 January 1973, Volume 11, Faculty: Records, Minutes, and Reports, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections & Archives. Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

<sup>41</sup> "Committee Reports", 17 January 1977, Volume 11, Faculty: Records, Minutes, and Reports, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections & Archives. Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

major graduated in 1973 with a primary major in English followed by an Economics-ES coordinate major the following year.<sup>42</sup> By 1978 the program had 17 total graduates with corresponding majors in Biochemistry, Biology, Economics, Geology, Government, History, and Visual Art.

However, during the 1980s the college began to question the quality and organization of their environmental program. A 1980 report listed continuity of courses, staffing, and lack of integration as some of the problems faced by the Environmental Studies program.<sup>43</sup> The report proposed the addition of ES faculty and the appointment of a program director as two crucial steps towards improving the program. Additionally, the report proposed more rigid requirements for ES major courses in addition to the departmental major which included coursework in three areas of concentration: 1) environmental sciences 2) resource management and 3) culture. Prior to the report, major requirements had been student designed from an approved list of courses with no breakdown by concentration. In December 1981, the Environmental Studies Committee adopted the proposal's provisions and Prof. Samuel Butcher from the Chemistry Department became the first program director in 1982.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, three new Environmental Studies courses and five associated independent study courses were added between 1982 and 1983, focusing on concentrations set forth in the 1980 proposal. A 1986 report by the Environmental Studies Committee highlights the program's growth through increased financial and administrative support and the corresponding establishment of an Environmental Studies Center

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<sup>42</sup> "A Proposal for Environmental Studies at Bowdoin College in the 1980s: The Second Decade", 1979, Box 1, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections & Archives. Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

<sup>43</sup> "A Proposal for Environmental Studies at Bowdoin College in the 1980s: The Second Decade", 1979.

<sup>44</sup> "Annual Report of the Environmental Studies Committee", 7 February 1983, Faculty: Records, Minutes, and Reports, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections & Archives. Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

in 1985 along with the addition of new academic and organizational staff.<sup>45</sup> With the establishment of new facilities and personnel, the ES program worked to expand its course offerings, particularly within the humanities. Included in the program's expansion was an Environmental Discussion Series with guest speakers from across the nation featured from 1984 to 1985. The diversity of lectures reflects a shift in Bowdoin's environmental curriculum towards understanding national and global issues rather than solely local problems.

As the ES program gained participation, resources, and distinction within the Bowdoin curriculum, the program stabilized much more in the 1990s and beyond. In addition to growing in numbers of graduates, the Environmental Studies expanded its horizons of integrating concepts into the twenty-first century. A CEP meeting in 1990 discussed the need for further integration of environmental concepts in government and the social sciences.<sup>46</sup> Almost a decade later in 2002, the Environmental Studies and Africana Studies Programs in addition to the Department of Government and Legal Studies held a symposium titled "Race, Justice, and the Environment" which further pushed the boundaries of Environmental Studies.<sup>47</sup>

Despite its growth and development in the past fifty years, Environmental Studies has had a fair amount of continuity in its time at Bowdoin. The Bowdoin College Website still lists success in graduate school and professional opportunities as a main advantage of the coordinate major, placing a heavy emphasis on internships and experience within the field.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, a primary major is still required to accompany studies of the environment, a structure of the major

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<sup>45</sup> "Annual Report of the Environmental Studies Committee", January 1986, Faculty: Records, Minutes, and Reports, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections & Archives. Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

<sup>46</sup> "Minutes of the CEP Meeting", 16 May 1989, Volume 5, Faculty: Records, Minutes, and Reports, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections & Archives. Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

<sup>47</sup> "Symposium on Race, Justice, and the Environment", 22 February 2002, Department of Environmental Science, Records, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections & Archives. Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

<sup>48</sup> Environmental Studies." Bowdoin College. Accessed May 10, 2022. <https://www.bowdoin.edu/environmental-studies/index.html>.

which has changed very little since the program's inception. Although no longer required, the department still promotes opportunities for independent study and honors research, along with requiring a senior seminar. Furthermore, the introductory course still utilizes faculty from other departments to create a truly interdisciplinary approach.

With over 80 Environmental Studies courses offered today, Bowdoin has expanded the disciplines involved in Environmental Studies drastically with courses involving Art History, Statistics, Oceanography, Computer Science, Anthropology, and more.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, the scope of Bowdoin's courses has evolved to target more global issues with courses like "Institutional approaches to Climate Change", "The Ethics of Climate Change" and "The Nature of Health in the United States and the World" littering the Course Catalogue. Although the scope of Bowdoin's Environmental Studies program now reaches far outside the issues faced by the Androscoggin, Bowdoin's Environmental Studies program still pays close attention to environmental issues specific to the coast of Maine. Unique courses such as "Maine: Community and Environmental History", "Fishing in the Gulf of Maine" and "History of Harpswell and the Coast of Maine" remain readily available to students in addition to numerous opportunities for community engagement.<sup>50</sup> John McKee would be happy to know that Bowdoin College stays committed to understanding and protecting the Maine coast. What was once the private coastline the McKee warned about became Bowdoin's Coastal Studies Center at the end of the twentieth century so that Bowdoin students continue to research and advocate for the local environment while also working to understand the complexities of Environmental Studies through a global and interdisciplinary lens.

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<sup>49</sup> Bowdoin College, "Bowdoin College Catalogue (2021-2022)" (2021). Bowdoin College Catalogues, Course Guides, and Academic Handbooks. 319.

<sup>50</sup> Bowdoin College, "Bowdoin College Catalogue (2021-2022)" (2021).

## **Conclusion**

The breadth and complexity of Environmental Studies complicated program development, requiring new ideas for structuring of majors, interdisciplinary course development, and large amounts of institutional resources. The wide range of concepts and integrated disciplines required a diverse array of faculty, a difficult task considering the newness of environmental fields. As programs developed, the field of Environmental Studies grew with research and programs had to adapt to account for rising awareness of global environmental issues. By embracing the interdisciplinarity of Environmental Studies, institutions were able to educate graduates in a variety discipline to see environmental studies as intertwined with every aspect of society. Through program development, coordinate major programs, and persistence to promote environmental literacy at schools such as Bowdoin, what was once Environmental Studies' biggest challenge is now perhaps one of its greatest strengths. The breadth of Environmental Studies is no longer portrayed so much as issue of lack of core concepts but rather an opportunity to grow environmentalist attitudes and behaviors from numerous perspectives. With further development, Environmental Studies can continue to create cohesion between college departments, serving as an integrating-link between academic disciplines.