



From Knowledge to Action: International Human Rights and the Study of our Environment

by Tara DePorte



Humans vs. Nature: Our Environment
“The environment” often brings to mind pristine mountain streams, lush tropical rainforests, or frolicking penguins in the arctic. Seldom does one envision schoolchildren suffering from asthma in the South Bronx, communities recovering from flooding in Bangladesh, or women traveling far distances down dark roads for firewood in Kenya. Unfortunately, “the environment” is too often relegated to people-free, postcard images, rather than as the systems, resources, and life upon which we depend daily. As it is impossible to ignore human impacts on “the environment,” it is also impossible to ignore environmental impacts on every aspect of human life. The Declaration on Human Rights establishes that “everyone has a right to life, liberty and personal security.” Environmental variability and degradation affect all sectors of life and their most dramatic impact is the increase in vulnerability of the world’s poorest populations. Fundamentally, life on earth requires water, air, food, and shelter. If we think of these necessities for life in terms of human rights, can one achieve “life, liberty and personal security” without access to potable water, clean air, food security, and adequate shelter? Therefore, are they not basic human rights? There is no question that environmental stewardship is ethically, if not innately, linked to “life, liberty and personal security.” Human rights and the environment are codependent; without access to a healthy environment, human rights are inaccessible.

The Responsibility of Knowledge

Environmental Studies searches to understand the never-ending complexities of our environment. One might focus on core issues such as natural resource management, climate change, or biodiversity, but these are all directly linked to poverty, health, equity, migration, conflict, and education. Specifically, every component of human rights depends on our environment and is threatened by global environmental variability and degradation. In today’s world of globalization and technology, we have knowledge of, if not direct links to, communities around the world. According to philosopher Kwame Appiah, “Each person you know about and affect is someone to whom you have responsibilities: to say this is just to affirm the very idea of morality.” Accordingly, we have knowledge that our actions directly impact the health of our local—and global—environment, thereby threatening the human rights of many throughout the world. As our knowledge continues to grow, so do our responsibilities.

Risk in an Inequitable World

The risks affiliated with environmental degradation are a shared reality: We are all at risk due to the impacts variability and degradation of our environment cause. Whether it be in the form of climate change, heavy metals in fish, dwindling forest reserves, feces-laden water, or failing crops, environmental variability and degradation

result in global increases of forced migration, inequitable resource allocation, disease, and death. The level of vulnerability we each face varies with our ability to adapt to these risks. For those of us with personal or community-based financial resources, support systems, and well-established infrastructure, we are at less risk for compromising our human rights to “liberty and personal security” when faced with environmental challenges. According to the Human Development Report, vulnerability “describes an inability to manage risk without being forced to make choices that compromise human well-being.” In 2006, more than one billion people were living in conditions of extreme poverty (less than U.S.\$1 a day), with 2.7 billion living with less than \$2 a day. However, poverty reaches far beyond income generation; it transcends access to natural resources such as water, food and fuel, access to and quality of education, and the ability to live free from disease—particularly those diseases for which cures exist. According to the UN Millennium Project, “every year eleven million children die—most under the age of five and more than six million from completely preventable causes like malaria, diarrhea and pneumonia.” Accordingly, in vulnerable communities, environmental degradation and variability result in lower school enrollment—particularly for girls—increased levels of malnutrition, a higher propensity for natural resource-related conflicts, and much more. Current global energy demands, rapid land-use change, over-consumption, and the burning of fossil fuels continue to increase the vulnerabilities of communities throughout the world. If left unchecked, our daily choices reinforce global inequities and obstruct human rights. Developed countries have had decades to exploit natural resources with minimal accountability. As a result, we are forcing the world’s poor to disproportionately suffer under the consequences. Allowing already vulnerable populations to deal with the impacts of environmental degradation—of which they have had minimal contribution to this point—only exacerbates inequity and injustice. It is important for us all to consider the following: inaction is a form of action. This is particularly true in the case of the impacts of our environment on human rights. Our actions and inactions today will greatly impact human development in the years to come: we have technology; we have financial resources; however, we lack sufficient collective action. One of the goals of higher education is to create spaces for learning, dialogue, and action. Learning more about the earth’s systems, and our involvement in them, is a first step. It is up to students and faculty alike to overcome apathy and to challenge us all to acknowledge our privileges, opportunities, and responsibilities. Can we reduce waste and over-consumption by honestly determining our “needs” vs. “wants”? Before we act, do we take into account the impact we have on our environment and others? Are we willing to apply our knowledge to make a difference?

These questions are critical in ensuring international human rights across cultures for current and future generations. As declared in the Human Development Report, we are all facing an ethical challenge: “Just as we do not discount the human rights of future generations because they are equivalent to ours, so we should accept a ‘stewardship of the earth’ responsibility to accord future generations the same ethical weight as the current generation.”



An adjunct professor at the Webster-Leiden campus in the Netherlands, Tara DePorte specializes in climate change, gender and natural resources, scientific communication, and other environmental issues. She has a B.A. in Human Impacts on Ecosystems from the University of Virginia and an M.A. in Climate and Society from Columbia University. DePorte is also the Program Director of the Lower East Side Ecology Center (www.LESEcologyCenter.org), a NY-based environmental non-profit.

Summer Camp Bridges China-America for Students *by Jie Fan*

This summer, the Confucius Institute at Webster University sponsored eighteen students from Missouri, Mississippi, Illinois, and Utah to take part in the annual Chinese Bridge Summer Camp for UK and US High School Students organized by Hanban and Confucius Institute Headquarters. Chinese Bridge Summer Camp is an exciting two-week summer camp that offers high school students a unique chance to experience China on a personal level.

After a long plane ride, we were warmly received at the Beijing Capital International Airport and checked into the Beijing Foreign Language School dormitories. During our three-day stay in Beijing, we went to Tiananmen Square, the Great Wall, Beijing Zoo, and Temple of Heaven. We also went shopping at the Hongqiao Market, also known as the Pearl Market. Hanban, Confucius Institute Headquarters, Beijing Foreign Studies University, and Beijing Foreign Language School held a spectacular opening ceremony with fireworks for the teachers and students. Chinese students and American and British teachers and students from other Confucius Institutes performed songs and dances.

On the fourth day, we took a flight to Changchun in the Jilin province. Changchun is considered the “number one” foreign language middle school in China. The principles and teachers warmly received us. The students were very happy to be able to stay in a five star hotel that was used mainly by government officials and foreigners. We attended two welcoming ceremonies that were held for us by the Jilin Province Board of Education and the Changchun Foreign Language Middle School.

Our stay in Changchun was filled with language and culture classes in the mornings. The students received Chinese names and learned to speak and write Chinese characters. They also took lessons in Chinese calligraphy, Tai Chi, Chinese paper cutting, and on the guzheng, a Chinese string instrument. Our classes ended once the weekend arrived and the Chinese teachers and students took us to the Changchun International Sculpture Park and Jilin Provincial Museum. We had a picnic and played games - such as tug of war - and dancing, at the Jing Yue National Park. We also took a boat ride on the Songhua Lake in Jilin City. The students also flew kites and got a chance

to interact with locals at the Cultural Square. The day before we had to leave for Beijing, a closing ceremony was held for us at the Confucian Temple. Our trip to China was definitely a wonderful and unforgettable experience. We got to meet and become good friends with some very special people that treated us like family.

The Department Associate for the Confucius Institute at Webster University, Jie Fan recently returned to China as a chaperone for Webster-sponsored students in the Chinese Bridge Summer Camp. Born in China, Fan was raised in the states, attending elementary school in New Jersey, middle and high school in Colorado. She attended Colorado State University for her undergrad and went to China for her grad school. Currently, Fan is working on another Masters and is taking courses at Webster.

International Opportunities for Graduate Students *by Kimberly McGrath*

Much like conducting research or writing a thesis—studying abroad as a graduate student isn’t easy. For Webster University Graduate students, however, there are always possibilities. Webster graduate courses are regularly offered in Geneva, Vienna, Leiden and London, and are available in the 8-week format. Some graduate courses are also available in Thailand. While the 8-week format is ideal for some graduate students, there are a variety of short-term programs for students to choose from.

Short-term, or faculty-led programs, are created and instructed by Webster faculty, and organized through the Office of Study Abroad. Most programs involve online work (hybrid), along with an international component, and take place during the summer term. Short-term programs have taken place worldwide, in destinations including Latvia, Germany, Namibia, Japan, Italy, Argentina, Egypt, Norway and China. Webster University’s international campuses provide graduate students with a unique immersion into their subject of study, and a chance to participate in the learning experience. In order to be eligible to study abroad, Graduate students must have completed 9 credit hours at a U.S. campus, be in good academic and financial standing, and submit their application by the program deadline. Study abroad program deadlines vary for Short-Term programs, and are as follows for 8-week terms: Summer - February 15, Fall - March 15, Spring - September 15.

Course offerings can be viewed from each campus’s website. Click on the international campus icon at <http://www.webster.edu/studyabroad>, and then click on the “course offerings” link. It is important to look at these projected schedules, and then meet with your academic advisor to discuss your options. For information on applying