

Green Care and Promoting Environmental Responsibility: Professor DeYoung

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Introduction

Professor Raymond DeYoung is an Associate Professor in the School of Natural Resources and the Environment at the University of Michigan. He received his Bachelor's degree in Engineering and Master's in Ocean Engineering from the Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey. In 1984 he received his PhD in Urban, Technological and Environmental Planning from the University of Michigan.

He is currently teaching courses in the psychology of environmental stewardship, the relationship between behavior and the environment, and the transition to a more localized society. His research interests include environmental planning and conservation behavior. Motivating people to actively practice environmental stewardship is a difficult task. We spoke with Professor De Young about the notion of Green Care, a new approach that aims to promote environmental responsibility from a variety of angles.

What is Green Care?

Green Care is a program that started initially in Europe. What they do in Europe is use agricultural and nature sites, particularly with at-risk people, bring them to nature and have them get directly involved with it. There are farms for people who are depressed or anxious. There are places for mentally or emotionally challenged kids and adults to live. It is being paid for by many of the countries in the European nations-their health insurance covers it. What they have only started doing is the research to back it up. There are lots of programs, and they see lots of positive effects, but they are only starting to figure out what works and what does not, why it works and how they can improve it. One of our colleagues here at UM and a few other people have helped them think about methods, measurements and theories.

But Green Care also is relevant for people who are not at risk for any particular psychological problem. Trying to strengthen everyone's ability to function and be effective in everyday activities is part of what we think of as Green Care. It is easy to imagine that adapting to climate disruption, adopting a simple and local lifestyle in a post-carbon world, and dealing with various social issues will mentally challenge and fatigue people in all countries and in all ages and walks of life. Green self care is a way of trying to strengthen our ability to problem-solve, cooperate and coordinate our responses.

Have corporations integrated Green Care and have

there been any incentives for corporations to do so?

I think they are slow to pick up on it. Psychology sometimes gets categorized as a soft, flimsy kind of science. I think it takes someone inside a company "to have seen the light," if you will, to really understand the psychological relationship to nature and to really push it as something in the corporation's self-interest. Left without such a psychological entrepreneur, the corporations have difficulty taking the first step. In contrast, hospitals have been getting involved in this area for a couple of reasons; one is that they themselves realize that patients heal better in the presence of nature. We have considerable research on that. In terms of cancer patients, who are dealing with long term uncertainty, some of the mental fog that has been attributed to chemotherapy is perhaps an attentional fog, a mental fatigue resulting from their struggle to keep their life focused under this prolonged uncertainty. When hospitals realized that nature can help, they became sensitive to how much nature their patients were exposed to, but nature also helps their staff of nurses, doctors, etc. They have begun to talk about having healing gardens in hospitals, having more access to nature through the windows and bringing nature inside hospitals. Here at U of M they have a wonderful meditation garden placed in the midst of the hospital buildings, and they also have the new Cardiovascular Center's (CVC) atrium, the cafeteria that overlooks the Huron River Valley, and a great many walkways with views of nature.

Does it work? There is controversy, a couple of competing theories with one developed here at U of M, and research publications emerging all the time. One recent study done locally (Berman, Jonides & Kaplan (2008) "The cognitive benefits of interacting with nature") was written up in Michigan Today, but while we have a good start on the research, it remains a fascinating question and needs more work.

Nature has begun to be brought into some corporate settings, high tech companies in particular. I think the other part of it is the corporations that allow people to work at home by telecommuting. They have begun to realize that when people are in a more natural home environment and have the flexibility of getting outside, taking their breaks in a backyard or walking their kids to school, they seem to perform better. We cannot be sure that all telecommuters take advantage of nature so this also remains an area needing more research, and we definitely need more people doing this research. Corporations are cautious adopting these notions. This probably seems like an amenity to offer their employees later when they are doing better economically. Right now I doubt that they think of access to nature as an important survival tool, but from our perspective as researchers, if you want a vibrant company then you need effective people. If you want to maintain your competitive



Figure 1: Cardiovascular Center Atrium (Photo Credit: University of Michigan Health System)

advantage, then take care of your employee's mental state; otherwise you're likely to have a bunch of bad decisions being made.

How do you measure worker satisfaction? Do you use a number scale or do you go through hundreds and hundreds of surveys?

It is a mixture of things. In terms of citizen satisfaction with various aspects of life, there are standardized scales that have been developed. We usually use these standardized scales but adapt them to the client we are working with, the specific population being studied. If we were studying worker satisfaction we might ask a series of questions that are each rated on a scale of, say, one-to-five exploring such things as "Do you find life fulfilling?", "Do you find it enjoyable coming to work?", "Have these been difficult times staying focused on your work?," "Do you feel like your personal goals are being achieved?" You take all of those items and subject them to a series of statistical tests called dimensional analysis, which tries to find structure among the answers. The structure is often a series of independent factors that you can use in other parts of the study, perhaps comparing them to worker or workplace characteristics, the amount of nature access individuals have during a typical week, or other social or psychological aspects of their work life.

Another way of doing this sort of study is to look for secondary data: how the company is performing, how a small group of workers is doing within a company, or reports of behavior from teachers, neighbors, or city offices. Some of the studies that are widely cited on the effect of nature on human wellness have explored urban living arrangements. One such series studied low-income housing where access to nature has been shown to reduce violence within families, increase school performance, and increase psychological wellness.

I understand that Green Care can support better lifestyles, encouraging conservation and sustainability. What can the average student do to encourage other students to adopt this Green Care philosophy?

That is a good question for a number of reasons. It touches on a series of related issues. We are a society that has gotten away from norms that support social influence, even social control. It is no longer appropriate for us to strongly influence each other's behavior. The notion of consumer sovereignty that is the basis of our market-based economic system has morphed into an individual sovereignty at every level of life. We feel entitled to do whatever we want, whenever we want. We are much more likely to reject people telling us what reasonable behavior is. The response is more often, "What right do you have to tell me what to do?" But students are in a situation where they can begin to change that. They can try to encourage others to change their behavior. If students were to buy into this Green Care idea, the idea that attentional fatigue is a problem that affects all of us and has implications on all our well-being, then they might begin to gently nudge each other to spend more time in nature or at least rest their mental mechanism more often.

Green Care, or similar efforts to restore our mental effectiveness, may be essential to creating the kind of communities that we think are valuable and worth living in. A colleague of mine once said that *burned out people can't help restore the planet*. Clearly, it is not enough to just know what you ought to do (i.e., take time in nature to restore your mental abilities). We actually need to act regularly to revitalize our mental capacity. While our society doesn't currently have a norm of time-off for mental restoration, students can change that right here, right now. Environmentally we need to *think local and act local* but to do that we first need to *restore local*.