RE: Innovation at The Evergreen State College

Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education
STARS: Sustainability Tracking Assessment & Rating System
1536 Wynkoop St., Ste. B500,
Denver, CO 80202

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing to attest to the innovative nature of The Sustainable Prisons Project at The Evergreen State College. Sustainable Prisons Project is a partnership of The Evergreen State College and the Washington State Department of Corrections. Its mission is to bring science into prisons by helping scientists conduct ecological research and conserve biodiversity through projects with offenders, college students, and community partners. Equally important, it reduces the environmental, economic and human costs of prisons by training offenders and correctional staff in sustainable practices, such as recycling, organic gardening, and composting. The Project focuses on connecting prisons with nature while contributing to formal scientific knowledge and literature.

The Department of Corrections (DOC) is responsible for more than 16,000 inmates in15 prisons in Washington – a commitment that draws heavily from the state's natural resources. In 2002, DOC responded to the Governor's directive to enhance the sustainability of its prisons. Concurrently, Evergreen began pilot activities at a minimum security prison to link scientists and conservation specialists with incarcerated men in an attempt to research and captively rear mosses. These efforts led to the establishment of the Sustainable Prisons Project (SPP) in July 2008. SPP now works within four prisons, the Cedar Creek Corrections Center, Mission Creek Correction Center for Women, Stafford Creek Corrections Center, and the Washington Corrections Center for Women. These facilities represent a broad spectrum of population size, gender, security level, and infrastructure, which maximizes the extensibility of this project to other locations.

SPP directly connects college students, inmates, DOC staff, and professionals in the community to conduct scientific research and conservation within prisons. At Cedar Creek Corrections Center, inmates and SPP student research associates work with Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife biologists to captive rear endangered Oregon Spotted Frogs in the prison, for release at Joint Base Lewis-McChord as a part of conservation efforts. At Stafford Creek Corrections Center, students and inmates annually raise over 173,000 endangered prairie plants, also used in restoration and conservation efforts at Joint Base Lewis-McChord. The process of raising these species provides students and inmates with hands-on experiential learning in science, sustainability, and conservation, while contributing to the knowledge of best practices in the field. Often, such work constitutes the basis for graduate level theses for students involved, thereby also contributing to the academic literature in these subject areas. These efforts have been extremely successful and both conservation projects have received multiple grants from state agencies and non—profit organizations to continue the work. A third conservation project rearing endangered Taylor's Checkerspot Butterflies is currently in the formulation stage.

Regarding sustainable operations, SPP combines top-down and grassroots approaches to implementing sustainable practices and policies within prisons. Research and training are presented to both DOC staff and inmates, helping ensure all aspects of the prison community possess the knowledge and skills to maintain composting and recycling systems and create a new prison culture valuing sustainability. These efforts are additionally supported by SPP by helping connect prisons with community organizations to address sustainability-related issues within the prisons.

Growing from an academic institution, SPP also maintains a commitment to education. The monthly Science and Sustainability Lecture Series is held in three of the participating prisons and brings community members to the prisons to deliver 90 minute lectures, with topics ranging from organic agriculture to bear biology to sustainability in poetry. Inmates and SPP student research associates enroll in Independent Learning Contracts through The Evergreen State College to earn academic credit in sustainability-related coursework. These activities and their resulting collaborations provide innovative approaches to supporting sustainable actions and policies and engage local sustainability organizations in a non-traditional form of public outreach. They also increase the understanding of issues surrounding sustainability while introducing inmates to educational and employment opportunities they may pursue after release, a critical factor for reducing recidivism according to the Washington State Institute for Public Policy[1].

SPP works with professional evaluators to document the effects of its activities on the knowledge, behavior, and attitudes of all participants, and has received numerous awards for its innovative practices. It serves as a model for how institutions of higher education can take non-traditional approaches to education and research, while exemplifying sustainability measures that can be employed by prisons and other residential institutions such as military bases and assisted living centers, locally and globally.

Responses to this project have been universally positive. The Evergreen State College sees it as an opportunity for graduate and undergraduate students and other faculty to be involved with meaningful education and cutting-edge conservation biology. Prison officials see it as a way to provide education, enhance social interactions, and reduce infractions by mentally engaging their inmates. Conservationists view it as a way to grow biota needed to enhance drastically diminishing populations in a cost-effective way that is not exploitative, but rather provides connections for this nature-starved population to preserve the biosphere. SPP views it as a way to demonstrate that all components of society can participate in the scientific enterprise.

In summary, this project represents an innovative effort to connect prisons with nature and support all aspects of society in supporting an environment and culture that thrives sustainability.

Sincerely,

Nalini M. Nadkarni, Ph.D.
Member of the Faculty
The Evergreen State College
2700 Evergreen Parkway NW, Lab II
Olympia, Washington 98505

[1] The Washington State Institute for Public Policy, multiple articles, retrieved from http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/topic.asp?cat=10&subcat=52&dteSlct=0