

Turning Points and the Ecological Conscience

by

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Abstract:

We live in a time when environmental crises seem to be overwhelming: global climate change, water crises, and mass extinctions, to name a few. Some people seek out ways to address environmental problems, while others remain ignorant or deny the existence of serious issues. Aldo Leopold's land ethic calls those who help, people who feel "the stirring of an ecological conscience." Many studies have looked at the psychology of environmentalism and the factors that instill an environmental ethic. Some studies look at early childhood, others at significant turning point events. Many factors foster an ecological conscience among people. I was interested in how the "stirring of an ecological conscience" was instilled in our own community here at Paul Smith's College. The faculty and students all have a story to tell about what led them here and this project explored that. The sample studied here found that among faculty and students, experiences from childhood played a significant role in the development of an ecological conscience. These experiences most often influenced the path of each participant's life journey. These findings provide us with information on ways we can look to help instill the ecological conscience in others, through education and daily life.

Acknowledgments:

I would like to first thank my mentor Craig Milewski for helping me develop the goals of this project and for educating me, and so many others, on the works of Aldo Leopold.

I would also like to thank all those that took the time to take my surveys and sit down for interviews. I would especially like to thank all of the faculty members that sat down with me and opened up about the origins of their ecological conscience.

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Introduction:

In the beginning of A Sand County Almanac (1949) Aldo Leopold writes, “There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot. These essays are the delights and dilemmas of one who cannot.” At the end of the book in “The Land Ethic” he says, “A land ethic, then, reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the land.” The stirring of the ecological conscience is a major theme in his book. Leopold shares his own convictions, and spells them out for the rest of us to understand. It is not denied that some people do feel this stirring he describes, but what causes it? Is it something that must be learned in childhood, or is it an “aha” moment? Research on the topic is broad, but it all aids in pinpointing how one develops an ecological conscience.

Turning points in people’s lives have been studied in various ways; some have looked at aging adults and found that many people have opinion changes based on personal health at some point in their life (Cappeliez, Beaupre, & Robitaille, 2008). Others have looked at the classic case of an imprisoned criminal that turns their life around. One such study found that a criminal cited reflecting on his personal experiences and looking inward on himself as a turning point, along with influences from art and literature (Chandley & Rouski, 2014). Another study of criminals cites a young man having an incident where a man did not shoot him because he had his child with him. This experience caused the man to change his lifestyle and care more for his kid because as he says, “Bullets don’t have names” (Hughes, 1998). Maybe these types of experiences happen to people who are ecologically conscious as well.

In “Development of an ecological conscience: Is ecocentrism a prerequisite?” Johnson (1996) comes to several conclusions on the formation of an ecological conscience. One is her belief that a concern for the survival of the human race is necessary. Due to the current rising awareness of environmental issues on the planet many feel a need to act so that people may survive the crisis. They do not necessarily act so that the earth and the species that inhabit it survive. Based on

these findings, almost all ecological consciousness is anthropocentric in some form or another, but how does that explain environmental extremists or terrorists? Is there more to this stirring, other than “survival”.

Environmental educators are looking at the different ways to work with children and instill the foundations for an ecological conscience. The ideas they are using reflect methods that make sense for creating more ecocentric mindsets. One idea is that environmental educators must switch from the transferring of information to the creation of knowledge (Shmeleva, 2009). This reflects the study with the inmates when a turning point was reached, not because someone lectured them on how bad it was that they committed a crime, but rather because their own personal reflection revealed the nature of their wrong or a sudden realization stopped them cold. It appears this can be applied to the ecological conscience. The ecological conscience is not formed by a brain full of facts, rather it is due to the ability of the person to look into a situation and understand the ethics of it. The artist Liu Xianping is using this technique in his literary works as he attempts to question morality and induce thought regarding the ecological conscience. (Xudong, 2012).

One complete study of the development of the ecological conscience was done by James Swan, one of a group of students at the University of Michigan that created the definition of environmental education in the 1970's. After years of curiosity, he went out and interviewed his colleagues and came up with a list of the things he found that could be described as “turning points”. These include: becoming well informed, serving a sense of social justice, concern for personal and public health, seeking personal health and fitness, and profound emotional/spiritual experiences (Swan, 2010).

Following Swan's findings, I explored “turning points” and the formation of an ecological conscience in students and faculty at Paul Smith's College. By having conversations with students and professors who have felt the stirring of the ecological conscience, an understanding of their origins is revealed as part of the campus identity. I wanted to understand what caused their turning points to see if there was a trend among those on campus that I studied. We have a unique

community at Paul Smith's College, focused on, "It's all about the experience."
Although this study is not comprehensive of the entire campus community I wanted to see if students and professors that felt the stirring of the ecological conscience had similar origins that led them to this place.

Methods:

This project was interview based. Two groups within the PSC community were studied: faculty and students. A face to face interview was conducted with faculty, while students received a paper survey. Thirty-six professors in environmental-oriented programs were emailed, with a simple request asking to partake in an interview if they believed they felt the stirring of the ecological conscience. Of the student body, surveys were given to twenty students in a 400-level humanities course: Aldo Leopold and the Stirring of the Ecological Conscience.

The interviews began with a prompt followed by a series of standard questions. This was the prompt:

In 1949 Aldo Leopold spoke of “The Ecological Conscience” in his book *A Sand County Almanac*. He generally defines this as “... A conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land.”

Today I am here interviewing you to look at the psychology of the Paul Smith’s College community in order to get a glimpse of who we are as a thinking community. More specifically what has caused the stirring of the ecological conscious here? So, to start I would like to ask (yes or no), have you felt the stirring of the ecological conscious as Leopold defines it?

This question was asked more as a confirmation that the participant had in fact felt the stirring of the ecological conscience, if the answer was no, they would be asked to explain their reasoning and the interview would end there. But this research was meant to look at those who have felt the stirring.

Following this, a question was asked on how important aesthetics, emotion, intellect, morality and spirituality were to the participant’s development of an ecological conscience. For each value they were asked to rate its importance on a scale of one to five, with one being not important, and five being very important. These values are from Angermeier’s research, where the above categories were listed as values that intact ecosystems contribute to the human psyche.

Then a series of questions were asked, one for students and one for faculty. The full student survey can be found in the appendix.

Faculty:

1. Can you please describe a specific event or a period in your life that significantly influenced your development of an ecological conscience?
2. Did this specific event or period in your life cause a significant change in your life journey?
3. How so?

Students:

1. Can you please describe a specific event or a period in your life that significantly influenced your development of an ecological conscience?
2. Do you have any thoughts or feelings as to how an ecological conscience will/or has influenced your life and work?
3. Have you had any experiences on campus that have helped you to develop an ecological conscience?

Responses to questions two were categorized into 5 areas based on Swan's research (2010), which were described as leading causes to development of an ecological conscience. Definitions of the five categories are as follows:

1. Becoming well informed

For example members in this group would have become aware through education on the issues. This knowledge was enough to make them think the way that they do.

2. Serving a sense of social justice

For this group, members would have become more conscious because they felt protecting the environment was protecting the people. For example if someone lived in a low income area where coal plants were put in, one would become ecologically conscious through the damages done to others.

3. Concern for personal and public health

Separate from the previous group that was also similarly concerned with human health, this group became conscious through experiencing the healing benefits of being in nature on a psychological scale. Swann cites John Muir's

early escapes to the forest to avoid his tyrannical father as someone that would fall into this category.

4. Seeking personal health and fitness

This group derives their consciousness from a recognition that things typically good for the planet are also good for them. For example these people would be those who discovered organic farming because they believe that eating this produce is healthier for them. This group seeks personal fitness more on a physical level, than on the psychological level.

5. Profound emotional/spiritual experiences.

This group is based upon major events in peoples lives that were powerful enough to cause them to care for the environment, or feel a connection to it. For example a kid who spent a lot of time at outdoor summer camps may become ecologically conscious because of the impact that those summers played on his life.

For the other questions a yes or no categorization was used for the general consensus on each topic. The explanations of each were used in the discussion in conjunction with other research.

To organize and graph my results I used Microsoft Excel.

Results:

Of the professors that were emailed, nine responded to the email and I met them for interviews. Of the students in the course “Aldo Leopold and the Stirring of an Ecological Consciences”, nineteen of twenty-two completed the survey.

Of all the participants in the study only one said no to the first question, have you felt the stirring of the ecological conscious as Leopold defines it? This was a student and their answer was: “No, because it is not a responsibility it should be our nature instead. Responsibility is assuming a caretaker which I believe we should not view ourselves as.” The student then went on to answer the rest of the questions as though they had said yes to the first response.

Students were asked to list their academic programs. The programs represented are as follows in Figure.1

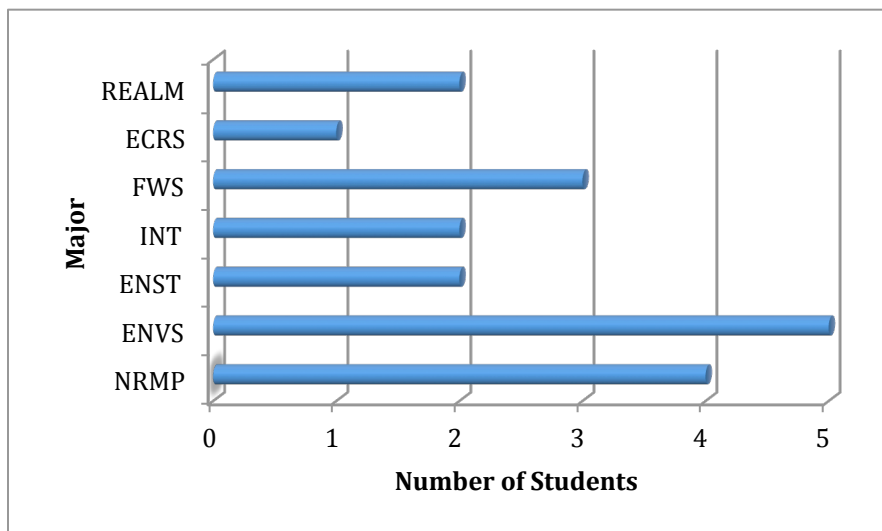


Figure. 1 The Academic programs of surveyed students are represented in this graph. Realm is the outdoor recreation degree, ECRS is ecological restoration, FWS is Fisheries and Wildlife Sciences, INT is integrated studies, ENST is Environmental Studies, ENVS is Environmental Science, NRMP is Natural Resource Management and policy.

How the students responded to the level of importance scales is represented by Figure.2. Most students gave a three or higher for all categories except for Spirituality where the three level was most chosen. How professors responded to the survey is represented by Figure.3. The Professors were similar to the students in that the upper ends of each idea were represented more than the lower, except for spirituality, where there are answers on both levels.

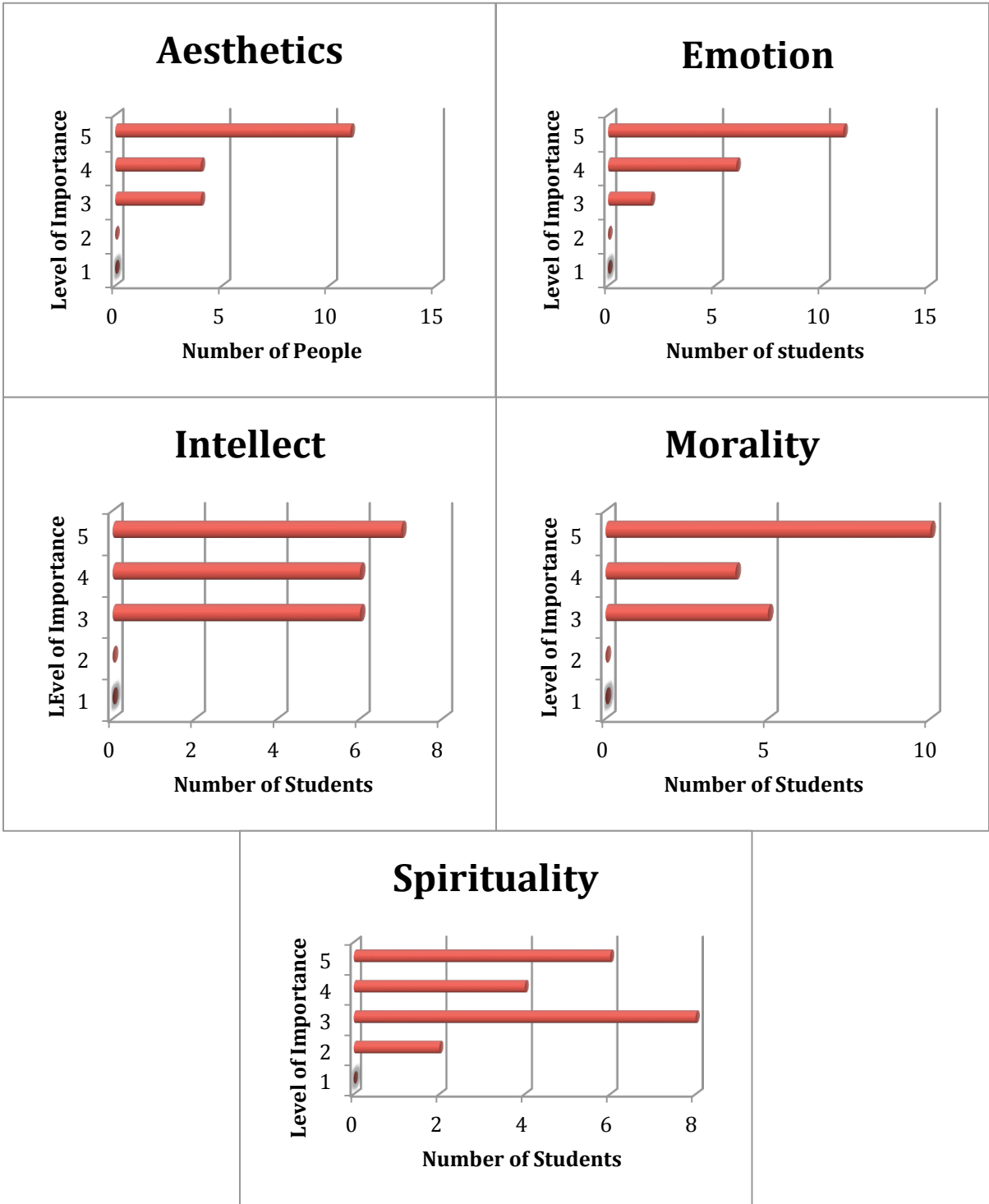


Figure.2. The importance of certain values in the development of student's ecological conscience is represented by these graphs.

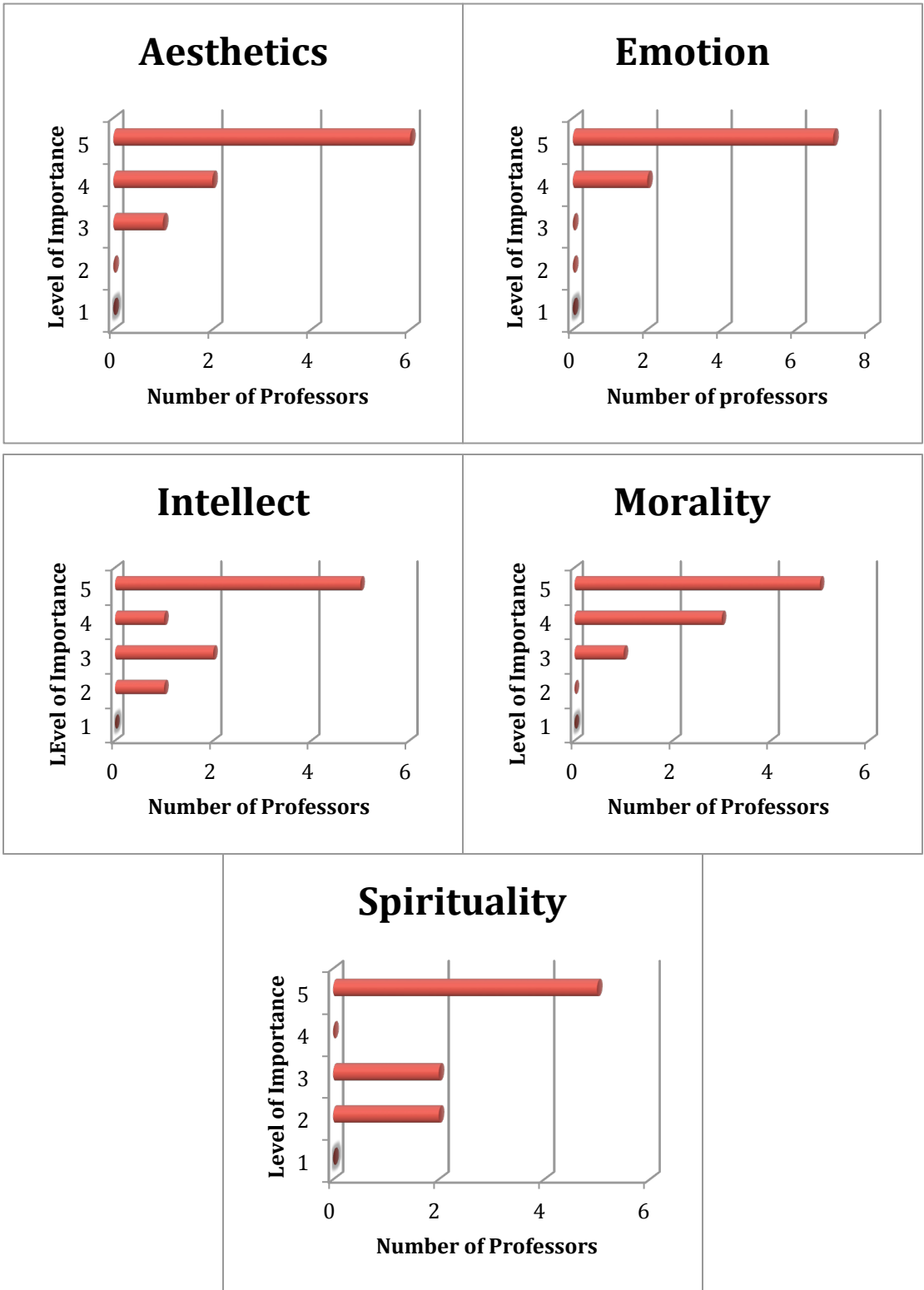


Figure.3 The importance of certain values in the development of faculty ecological conscience is represented by these graphs.

When asked to describe a moment in their life that led to the development of an ecological conscience, students often fell into the profound emotional and spiritual experiences category. There were a few outliers though, Figure.4 takes a look at where students fell on the spectrum. For the professors the scale looks quite similar to the students as many of them also found that profound emotional/spiritual experiences played the largest role in their development of the ecological conscience. Fig.5 shows the spectrum that they fell under.

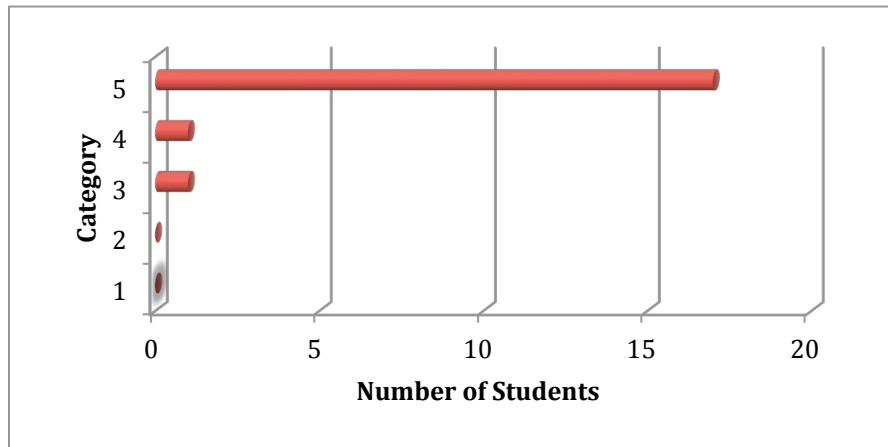


Figure.4. Represents where students fell under Swan’s Categories. 1 is becoming well informed, 2 is serving a sense of social justice, 3 is concern for personal or public health, 4 is seeking personal health or fitness, 5 is profound emotional/spiritual experiences.

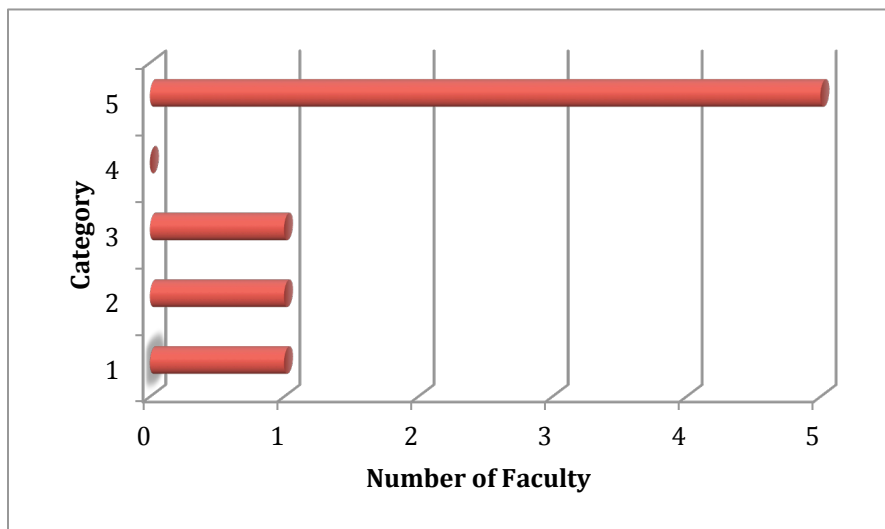


Figure.5. Represents where the faculty fell under Swan’s categories. Fig.4 has a list of what each number category represents.

After this question the professors only had one more question to answer, regarding whether or not these moments impacted their life's journey. All professors answered yes to this question, most often citing the job they chose and how they live their lives as major changes that were influenced by these moments.

Students were asked this question differently, where they were asked about how they saw it affecting their futures. Only two students said that it would not affect their futures, while the others fell into two categories I made up, based on their responses. The categories were, work, lifestyle, or both. The students typically said that their development of an ecological conscience would heavily impact either, the work they do in the future, the way they will live their life, or both of these. Twelve students said that it would change their lifestyle, two said it would affect their job choice, and three fell into the category of both.

The students were also asked if any experiences they have had on campus influenced their development of an ecological conscience. Eighteen students said that their development was influenced by experiences on campus, while one said no.

Discussion:

Although roughly a third of the professors I asked to participate responded to my request, I believe that I was still able to gather a dense and important amount of knowledge from them. This project was slightly rigged so that I would only be interviewing people who felt the stirring of the ecological conscience, but that is because my original question is what causes the stirring? These faculty members and students shed light on what causes the stirring of the ecological conscience, and provided information that can be used for further education. What I mean by this is that the Paul Smith's tagline "It's all about the experience" is represented well by this group. The majority of each surveyed group fell under Swan's category of "profound emotional/spiritual experiences" as the leading cause of their development of an ecological conscience. For many that I interviewed these experiences happened during childhood or at college. For example, one faculty member talks about spending the first four years of her life in the Philippines where she lived very close to nature, walked barefoot and picked fruit off of trees. At four years old her family moved to Rhode Island, this sudden move to suburban life left her longing for a return to more natural places and as she grew older a feeling of responsibility to protect them. Most people I interviewed related experiences to their development, and it is only fitting that they would wind up at Paul Smith's in search of more experiences that leave such profound effects.

James Swan says, "While there are many paths that lead to being a committed conservationist, almost all dedicated conservationists can trace their passion for nature to exceptional emotional experiences." (Swan, 2010) What Swan found among the many people that he looked at, held true within this group as well. The importance of going out and experiencing nature as a child should not be overlooked. In the introduction I mention Pamela Johnson's conclusion that ecocentrism is a necessary prerequisite to the development of an ecological conscience (Johnson, 1996). From my own research, along with Swan's I would have to disagree with this. It could be argued that these early life experiences are a form of ecocentrism where the youth is drawn in by nature, but I believe that it is only pleasure that brings them to the woods. Enjoyment of simply being outside is

different than ecocentrism because ecocentrism implies that you feel a desire to protect it, or place it higher than other things, but if one just enjoys being outdoors as a kid, they may not understand that the forest should be protected. Eventually all of those that I surveyed had fallen into this, where they liked being outside, but one day realized the need for its protection. One faculty member says that she always knew she liked nature and she liked being outside, but it wasn't until a fellow faculty member told her that global warming was real that she understood the necessity to protect the environment. Ecocentrism appears to not have been a prerequisite in her case, and I believe many others that I surveyed would agree that ecocentrism did not come first.

Similarly there were the papers that looked at the psychology of turning points in the lives of inmates. These studies came to show that many of the inmates had "aha" moments while in prison, most likely do to the extreme change in environment and lifestyle (Hughes, 1998). While this "aha" moment kind of turning point was prevalent in this study, it does not have much merit in the development of an ecological conscience. For most people the development is slow; childhood experiences, college years, or something to that extent. I hardly got an answer that was along the lines of someone reading a book and instantly realizing that they need to protect the planet. I was slightly disappointed that this never came up, but it does show that within my study group many are impacted more by day to day experiences than a single bit of information.

It is interesting to look at the importance scales as they show how many factors play into the development of an ecological conscience. No participant chose five for one category and then zero for the rest. Aesthetics, emotion, intellect, morality, spirituality, they all played a role in each persons development. Spirituality was the most controversial of the five categories as participants typically gave that a very neutral answer. By not having a large portion of participants choose the number one it shows that, although not popular, it still does play its role. In Angermeier's article he says that all of these play a role the effect of intact ecosystems on the psyche (2007). In my own research I was looking to see if one was more important than the others, but it is shown that for the most part all are

important. If one stood out the most it would be the emotion category. Based on the evidence that most people in my group developed an ecological conscience through profound emotional experiences, this would make sense.

Another important part of this research is that the majority of the study group said these experiences had, or will, impact the journey of their life. Faculty members said that their experiences played important roles in their decision to become professors and work at Paul Smith's College. It also plays a role in their daily life as well. One faculty member said that he absolutely recycles or reuses anything that he can. He was also against the use of pressure treated lumber because it doesn't break down like natural wood does. Clearly the impacts on lifestyle are profound. Many students said that they would be pursuing careers in the environmental field, while others say that the way they act on a day to day basis has already changed to be more sustainable.

This is important in relation to the ecological conscience, as Leopold says, those who feel the stirring, feel a responsibility to care for the land. The change in lifestyle that students and faculty made, is correlated to the responsibility they may feel to protect the land, as it is not something that is to only be done at work, but in all aspects of life.

Looking at the benefits of this research to education, in the intro I mention how environmental educators are looking at many teaching methods to help instill the ecological conscience in youth (Potter, 2012). What this research shows, especially for Paul Smith's is that experience is incredibly important. Sitting in a classroom and learning about our environmental crises is not enough. Steps must be taken to understand and cultivate an ecological conscience in a positive way. Although being knowledgeable is important for those going into the environmental field, in order to instill this consciousness we must get students outside and immersed in the natural world. Paul Smith's has always encouraged this, and creates a great example for other institutions.

This study found that, yes, there is a trend among the survey group regarding the origins of their ecological conscience. The Paul Smith's College tagline, "It's all about the experience." Is represented by this user group and shows that they take

the most from profound emotional and spiritual experiences. Everyone's story was a little bit different, but they all revolved around this. These experiences influenced the decisions they made in their life journey, and will be affecting the decisions they make in the future. Although this group does not represent the entire campus, it does represent a part of it, and for that part, the experience really is everything.

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Appendix:

Survey Given to Students

Major _____

In 1949 Aldo Leopold spoke of “The Ecological Conscience” in his book A Sand County Almanac. He generally defines this as “... A conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land.” Today I am surveying you to look at the psychology of the Paul Smith’s College community in order to get a glimpse of who we are as a thinking community. More specifically what has caused the stirring of the ecological conscience here, if it exists at all? So, to start I would like to ask (yes or no), have you felt the stirring of the ecological conscience as Leopold defines it? If no, please ignore the following questions and explain, to the best of your ability, your reasons.

1. Based on your experience how important were the following in your development of an environmental awareness?

1 = not at all 2 = somewhat 3 = neutral 4 = important 5 = very important

Aesthetics (a set of principles concerned with the nature and appreciation of beauty, especially in art.)

1 2 3 4 5

Emotion (instinctive or intuitive feeling as distinguished from reasoning or knowledge.)

1 2 3 4 5

Intellect (the faculty of reasoning and understanding objectively, especially with regard to abstract or academic matters.)

1 2 3 4 5

Morality (principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behavior.)

1 2 3 4 5

Spirituality (The quality or state of being concerned with religion or religious matters.)

1 2 3 4

2. Can you please describe a specific event or a period in your life that significantly influenced your development of an ecological conscience?

3. Have you had any experiences on campus that have helped you to develop an ecological conscience?

4. Do you have any thoughts or feelings as to how an ecological conscience will/or has influenced your life and work?