

The Research Ambassador Program

Nalini M. Nadkarni, Ph.D., Director

The Evergreen State College

Olympia, WA 98505

(360) 867-6621

nadkarnn@evergreen.edu

www.ResearchAmbassador.com



National Science Foundation
<http://www.nsf.gov>
Informal Science Education Program: NSF
0322214



National Geographic Society
Conservation Trust program
<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/conservation/index.html>



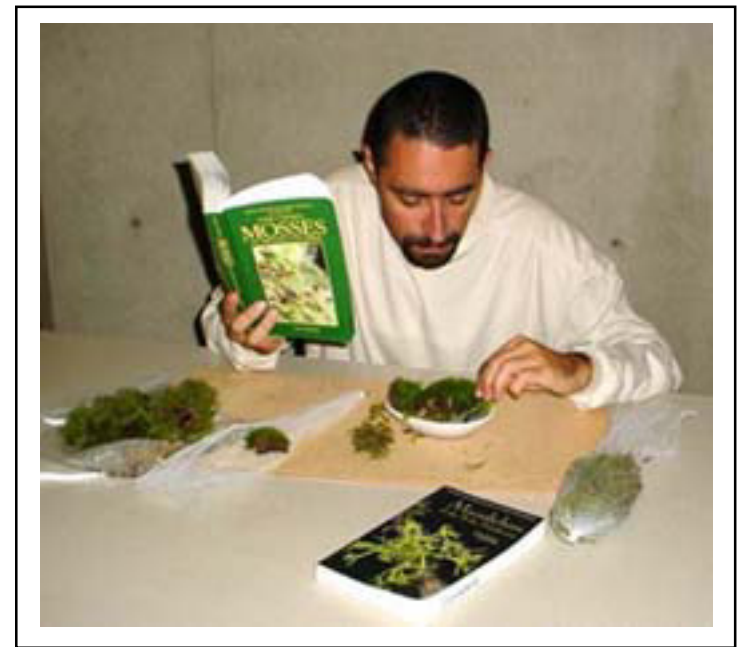
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THE RESEARCH AMBASSADOR PROGRAM

MOSS IN PRISONS



An outreach project by researchers to
communicate science to public audiences.

RESEARCH SCENARIO No. 5

SEPTEMBER 2005

RESEARCH AMBASSADOR

What is the Moss in Prisons project?

To investigate methods to sustainably grow mosses for the horticultural trade, Research Ambassadors enlisted the help of inmates at the Cedar Creek Correctional Center to grow mosses. One of the characteristics of plants is their ability to inspire renewal. Prisoners working with plants are given opportunities for both an emotionally rehabilitating experience and to learn about the process of science. Prisoners monitored the growth rates of four species of native mosses.



What issues does this project address?

Collection of mosses and other “secondary forest products” from the forests of

Washington is a growing industry for the horticultural trade. Collecting mosses from branches of trees in old-growth forests, is not sustainable. However, collecting continues, both legally and illegally. Two goals of the project were to provide emotional benefits to incarcerated persons and to provide an alternative to the harvest of wild moss populations.

MOSS IN PRISONS

How was it done?

Original moss samples were collected with a permit from the Olympic National Forest in Washington State. With the prisoners, researchers developed methods to grow mosses, including growing the wild-collected gametophytes in hanging mesh bags and in plastic flats with varying amounts of shade and water. Growth activity is documented by oven-drying and weighing subsamples on a monthly basis. Inmates also make observations and notes for participating researchers.



What were the outcomes?

The Moss in Prisons project is enthusiastically supported by the prison administration. Inmates eagerly participate in the project. The goal to provide sustainably grown mosses suggests promise. The project has led to the implementation of a lecture series at the prison called “Sustainable Futures - Sustainable Lives.” Visiting lecturers deliver talks about an aspect of sustainability or ecology. Lectures are attended jointly by prison staff and inmates.

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH AMBASSADOR PROGRAM?

A major problem facing our society is the widening gap between humans and nature, exacerbated by the lack of connections among science, scientists and society. The Research Ambassador Program helps bridge those gaps by providing academic scientists with rewards and incentives to do direct outreach to the public.

The Research Ambassador Program, established in 2003, has recruited scientists from many disciplines in academia and trained them to do outreach, especially in non-traditional venues such as churches, prisons, skateboard parks and hospitals. Researchers link their research to the interest of an existing profession, trade or interest group, and give talks or write popular articles about their research as it relates to that public audience. Rewards for scientists include a financial honorarium, a letter of thanks from a high-ranking academic, outreach training, and contacts to communicate in the local community.