THE GREENING OF HIGHER EDUCATION AT UCSB

A letter from Professor Emeritus Roderick Frazier Nash, founding chair, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Environmental Studies Program at UC Santa Barbara.

Two score and ten years ago a group of mostly young UCSB faculty brought forth a new way of teaching and learning dedicated to the idea of making higher education relevant again.

The motivation for change came from the infamous Santa Barbara oil spill beginning January 28, 1969. I joined those walking the blackened beaches and cried with my small daughters over the oil-soaked and dying sea birds and mammals. For presentation on January 28, 1970 I wrote THE SANTA BARBARA DECLARATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS, but it was clear I could not do much as an individual about oil company policy and lax government regulation. However, I could make a difference on my job site. For that reason, I agreed to chair the Chancellor’s Committee on Environmental Studies early that same year. Senior colleagues in the Department of History advised me as an assistant professor to stay away from the project, stick to business as usual. But my business had been writing books like WILDERNESS AND THE AMERICAN MIND (1967; fifth edition 2014) and I believed environmental education was an idea whose time had come.

It was a tumultuous time. Revolution was in the air. Young Americans faulted the leadership of their society on issues such as race, foreign war, and environmental abuse, and universities were not exempt from the anger. Protests virtually closed UCSB the first six months of 1970. Where, students asked, was instruction about reducing racism, getting out of the Vietnam War and ending degradation of the ecosystem? At one point in the spring quarter Professor Richard Martin, a chemist who taught the very first course in Environmental Studies, walked with me into a campus building littered with glass from broken doors and windows to plan a new major. “Maybe,” I wondered, “we shouldn’t be in here.” Looking around at the debris, Professor Martin simply replied that this was “exactly why we should be here.”

Two main ideas guided us in shaping Environmental Studies for its debut in the fall of 1970. One was that university teaching and learning should pay more attention to real-world problems like the oil spill, and biodiversity and climate change. For too long scholars had retreated to the so-called “ivory tower” of pure research. Wasn’t it time to apply knowledge to the big problems of our society? The second impelling idea fifty years ago was to transcend disciplinary boundaries and the departmental boundaries that enhanced them. What was the point of dividing a curriculum into sciences, social sciences and humanities when holistic issues like environmental quality were involved? For this reason I am glad that in our name we continue to use “studies”, not “science,” and that we are a “program” not a “department.”

On this fiftieth anniversary of Environmental Studies I wish to celebrate the faculty, supporting staff and the thousands of students who carried on the torch we kindled back in the day. Thanks to them UCSB continues to sustain the vision that the world can be different and better.

Roderick Frazier Nash
January, 2020
About Professor Rod Nash:

Dr. Roderick Nash was one of 21 UCSB faculty members who joined together in response to the 1969 Santa Barbara Oil Spill and pushed for the creation of the Environmental Studies Program. He was the first ES chairman in 1970 and is considered one of America's foremost wilderness historians. He is regarded as a national leader in the field of environmental history and management and environmental education. Among his numerous books and over 150 essays, Professor Roderick Frazier Nash is best known for *Wilderness and the American Mind*, which has received many reprintings, revised editions, and foreign translations. For a detailed history on Dr. Nash visit: [https://aapra.org/pugsley-bios/roderick-frazier-nash](https://aapra.org/pugsley-bios/roderick-frazier-nash)

For more on the history of the ES Program and to read Professor Rod Nash’s article *Environmental Studies: The Santa Barbara Experience*, published in the *Journal of Environmental Education* in Fall, 1974 visit the History of ES Program webpage: [http://es.ucsb.edu/about/history](http://es.ucsb.edu/about/history)

To view the *1970 Santa Barbara Declaration of Environmental Rights* visit: [https://www.es.ucsb.edu/about/history/declaration](https://www.es.ucsb.edu/about/history/declaration)