Diversifying partnerships in sustainability and ecological restoration:
collaborations with the incarcerated

Response to responses to the Diversity Luncheon, ESA meeting, August 10, 2017

A. Introduction

On August 11, 2017, some members of the Ecological Society of America (ESA) sent a response to the Diversity Luncheon Program, expressing concerns over the panelists who presented on the topic of " Diversifying partnerships in sustainability and ecological restoration: collaborations with the incarcerated". Below are our responses to these concerns, which have been reviewed by the other panel members and colleagues involved with similar programs.

Similar objections have been expressed numerous times in the 15-year history of programs that bring science education and conservation projects to the incarcerated. We understand that these are well intentioned. We also understand that they arise from the deep sense of injustice that the practice of mass incarceration evokes. We share that sense of injustice. The actions that the panel described are in response to **both** the need to engage all people in restoring damage to our environment **and** the need to work toward mitigating the social injustices of incarceration.

We are deeply aware that mass incarceration has pervasive and terrible human, economic, social, and spiritual costs, and is fraught with contradictions, power inequities, and injustices (UNESCO 2002). There are many different approaches that can be taken to ameliorate this situation. Some people choose to work in criminal justice reform and corrections policy. Others choose to make changes by working as staff, administrators, and officers within the corrections industry. Still others have advocated abolishing prisons altogether.

In the last two decades, a growing number of ecologists and conservationists have worked to alleviate some of the negative aspects of corrections by providing inmates with science education and access to conservation and sustainability efforts. This is one means of simultaneously alleviating the human costs of incarceration and the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem functioning of our planet. Below, we describe the background and rationale for the programs we presented at the Luncheon, which points out some compatibility between sustainability and corrections institutions. It also addresses the question concerning the use of "prison labor", which was raised as a question by an audience member.

B. From the Inclusive Ecologist's Section, Concerns 1 and 3) Concern for incompatibility of prison systems and sustainability and use of inmate labor, even for a worthwhile cause.

Over two million Americans are incarcerated in state and federal prisons, at an annual cost of $63.4 billion. Since the 1970s, the rate of incarceration has increased 500%. Each year, 650,000 people are released, and over 55% of these will reenter prisons within three years of release. Over 60% of former inmates remain jobless a year after their release (NRC 2014). Minorities are disproportionately represented in incarcerated populations[2]. Educational opportunities and contact with nature are minimal (BJS 2014).

History of programs: The approach of providing access to science education and conservation activities was initiated in Washington State in 2003, beginning with a single minimum security state prison. An ecologist involved inmates in an ecological restoration project (growing mosses for the horticulture trade to reduce wild-collecting of mosses from old-growth forests). This led to the introduction of regular lectures about conservation and science, which in turn led to collaborations

with conservation groups that provided training and opportunities for inmates to become directly involved ecological restoration projects. Simultaneously, ecologists helped corrections staff initiate and maintain sustainability projects such as recycling, gardening, composting, energy conservation, and water catchment. Overall, these activities provided male and female adult inmates in minimum and medium security levels with science education, job skills training, and collaborative interactions with people outside the prisons (conservation scientists and practitioners, undergraduate and graduate students, and education professionals) over extended periods of time. It also led to sustained relationships between scientists and corrections institutions that have enabled systemic changes in attitudes and activities surrounding sustainability, education, ecological restoration, and perceptions of inmates (Ulrich & Nadkarni (2009).

From the start, we have recognized the integral humanity of incarcerated people and—as we would want for any population—we want for them to have opportunities for engaging and meaningful pursuits, and to create a more humane and therapeutic environment. We regularly hear from program participants and learn from our assessment instruments that they are relieved to have access to our programs; without that assurance, we would discontinue them. Critique and formal evaluation of the programs has led to valuable refinement and clarification of the programming, and increasing accountability by and to all parties involved. Similarly, feedback from incarcerated individuals has informed program changes at every level. Considering and responding to criticism is central to the model.

While we acknowledge that incarceration severely limits the choices of the people in custody, the incarcerated participants in these programs are selecting science and sustainability activities above other options. Often, positions to participate are highly coveted. They are not used as a reward, and withdrawal from participation is not used as a threat or punishment. Activities are designed to accommodate a wide range of inmate capacity and experience. The Institutional Review Boards (IRB) of participating institutions provide oversight for work and other activities of incarcerated participants (which are defined as "vulnerable" populations), including proscribed informed consent, de-identification of information, and review of protocols and evaluation instruments. These practices are regularly reviewed by the IRBs, by panels that include at least one member who is an expert on limiting risk to the incarcerated. Results have been published in peer-reviewed ecological, social science, and corrections journals, to build evidenced-based protocols.

Connections with incarcerated people: We recognize the value of environmental programs for incarcerated participants for the benefits it offers to the participants, and for the enrichment they offer to science and the environmental movement. In addition to education and job skills (to be described below), the programs can offer awareness of and access to environmental justice, a topic that is critical to empowering the marginalized communities that have borne the brunt of environmental problems and injustices (Agveman & Evans 2003). At the same time, through their interest and involvement, the environmental movement gains much-needed diversity of experience, ideas, and ownership: science and ecology gain new students and advocates, and the disciplines become more relevant and adapted to contemporary inquiry and challenges.

Incarcerated participants regularly attest to these program benefits. Their formal and informal feedback on the programs is a crucial element of program evaluation and improvement. At the same time, we realize that *any* act in prison is suspect to coercion, and have sought input from formerly incarcerated participants. Previously incarcerated individuals have no obligation—social or legal—to contact program partners, and thus the feedback has been limited to anecdotal accounts and one qualitative study of enduring impacts to program participants' environmental identity (Passarelli 2017). In these post-incarceration interactions, we have heard positive accounts similar to those shared during incarceration. For example: "I didn't know so many things and the support that I had coming from the people who I worked with and just backing me through it all. Understanding my struggle and how I grew up, giving me a chance." (Passarelli 2017)

Connections to conservation and ecological restoration: Project organizers have created partnerships with corrections staff and conservation researchers and practitioners to directly involve incarcerated people in rearing, caring for, and better understanding rare and endangered plant and animal species. The biota they raise inside prisons are then placed in protected wildlands by conservation professionals as part of ongoing regional ecological restoration efforts. Over 20 prisons have helped protect biota such as the Oregon Spotted Frog, the Taylor Checkerspot Butterfly, the Least Chub (a fish), prairie plants, sage grouse, native bulrushes, and the American Kestral. Lectures and workshops on the biota and on the rationale for conserving biodiversity accompany these activities.

Connections to sustainability: Many projects promote sustainable living . e.g., installation and maintenance of organic gardens, composting of kitchen waste, bee-keeping, aquaponics, recycling trash and clothing, conservation of energy, and tracking of energy and materials use. None of these activities could have been sustained by people 'outside" of the institutions (e.g., faculty and conservation professionals), but rather have required the involvement, trust, communication with corrections staff who work in facilities, grounds, maintenance, security, and accounting. These initiatives are not merely resource-saving, they are part of an imperative culture shift.

Connections to Education: Education is the primary focus of science and sustainability programs in corrections facilities. Education for the incarcerated has long been considered a means of mitigating or even ending the negative cycle of incarceration and its ill effects. In 2013, the Bureau of Justice Administration commissioned a study on the costs and benefits of corrections education (Davis et al. 2013). This meta-analysis of thousands of studies provided unassailable documentation that provision of education of any kind (higher education, high school, GED, vocational, informal) reduced the probability of recidivism by 13% and the probability of post-release employment by 13%. Since 2005, our programs have provided science and sustainability education. These consist of monthly science lectures with accompanying handouts in eight prisons (over 480 lectures, touching over 23,000 inmates). The efficacy of lectures has been evaluated via pre- and post-lecture surveys that assess changes in knowledge content, attitudes about science and scientists, and individuals' own self-identity with respect to science learning. Results demonstrate that exposure to even a few lectures can enhance all of these factors[3].

Connections through nature imagery: For inmates in solitary confinement, where security constraints prevent science lectures or the presence of biota, we have provided nature videos in inmates' exercise rooms, which serves to calm inmates, diffuse agitation, reduce violence and raise interest in nature and science to populations that have access to neither. In a pilot study in a secured housing cellblock of a Supermax prison in Oregon, this intervention has reduced the number of violent infractions by 26% and contributed to reduction of stress and anxiety in inmates (Nadkarni et al. 2017)...

Relationships with corrections institutions: This work by necessity has required the development of long-term relationships with corrections administrators, staff, and officers. These include Secretaries of state prison systems, behavioral health staff, corrections policymakers, and line officers. These relationships have not only been valuable for implementation of projects, but also to create shifts in attitudes about the values of education, conservation, sustainability, and improved human interactions inside prisons.

Connections to human rights and social and environmental justice: These activities simultaneously have value for ecological restoration and education, and social and environmental justice. The *UN Council on Human* Rights (2009) articulated that healthy environments are closely tied to the enjoyment of human rights. Worldwide, people experience adverse effects from environmental degradation: lack of water, fisheries depletion, and deforestation. Indigenous peoples suffer directly from damage to the ecosystems that they rely upon. Thus, work to restore environments to health, and to include **all people** -- including the incarcerated -- in those efforts, is

consistent with this critical human right, and lies at the core of both social justice and environmental justice.

In 2013, the work to bring science education and conservation projects to the incarcerated was recognized by a major national award in social and environmental justice, th**e William Julius Wilson Award for the Advancement of Social Justice.** This award honors individuals who promote social inclusiveness and diversity in social policies and strive to reduce joblessness. It was named for William Julius Wilson (WJW), an African-American sociologist who is recognized as one of the nation's most accomplished and looked-to analysts of race, inequality, and poverty. Through his scholarship, he has profoundly influenced public discussions of social inclusiveness, poverty and joblessness, and helped shape social policies around these critical issues. The Award recognizes individuals and the actions they carry out that better address these complex challenges. WJW Award winners included Robert J. Sampson, one of the nation's top scholars in studies of urban inequality, crime, social structures and civic engagement (2013), who presented on poverty, crime and social structures of American cities and neighborhoods. In 2017, Elijah Anderson one of the nation's leading urban ethnographers, was honored for his many books, including Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City; and Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community. In 2015, Dr. Nalini Nadkarni, one of the leaders in programs that bring science education and conservation to the incarcerated, was awarded the William Julius Wilson Award for the Advancement of Social Justice in recognition of her work to promote social inclusiveness of incarcerated people and to reduce post-prison joblessness and recidivism.

Dissemination of this approach: This project has spread to over 30 prisons and jails in nine states and is funded (financially and with in-kind support) by state Departments of Corrections, the National Science Foundation (Advancing Informal STEM Learning Program), private donors, and foundations. Reports have appeared in scientific journals (including *Science* and ESA's *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*), newspapers, and mainstream media (CNN, MSNBC, Washington Post, New York Times, as well as corrections journals (Corrections Today) [see websites below].

Connections to policy: This is an auspicious time for scientists to contribute to criminal justice reform, For federal prisons, The Second Chance Act (SCA, 2008) was passed with bipartisan backing to support state, local, and tribal governments to reduce recidivism and improve outcomes for people returning from corrections facilities. This authorized federal grants for programs to improve the reentry by providing support for housing, education, employment, family relationships, substance abuse, and mental health treatment. Many states are now passing comprehensive criminal justice reform bills (e.g., the Utah House passed Bill 348 to create comprehensive criminal justice reform legislation, and provides funds mental health programs and directives for community supervision).

Compensation: Nearly all corrections systems encourage inmates to carry out some sort of work, and they provide a standard rate of pay. Although the rate of pay is low, it is not possible to exceed these established rates to work within the prison system. In contrast to typical inmate jobs (kitchen work, cleaning, laundry), our opportunities include contact with scientists and educators, acquisition of job and communications skills, learning animal and plant culture techniques, interacting with living things, exposure to the outdoors, and a sense of pride in participating in academic and conservation efforts. Our assessment results document that from the inmate standpoint, the "opportunity to contribute to something bigger than oneself", and "to improve the health of the Earth even while incarcerated" are cited as the most important motivations for their participation, with financial rewards ranking far below those reasons.

Summary: Although the corrections industry is rife with many kinds of injustice, waste of energy and materials, and disregard for humans dignity and potential, the current system exists, affecting nearly 2% of the US population. Through collaborations, ecologists have been successful in providing portals to science education at no cost to inmates. They have also provided opportunities

for inmates to contribute to honorable and important work that protects biodiversity and natural resources, and to shift their own identities from powerlessness to being contributory inside and outside of corrections institutions. This work is ripe for participation by all types of educators and ecologists, particularly those from diverse backgrounds. Such participation will be welcomed.

C. From the Inclusive Ecologist's Section letter, Concern 2) Concern for inadequate diversity of races/cultures/perspectives among the panelists

Of the four people involved in the panel, two are female (50%). One is an Asian American (25%). Although it may not have been apparent by observing the panel members, at least one member is LGBT+ and at least one member sustains severe health issues that have been considered disabling to his/her employer. It is important that observers do not make judgments about the diversity of race, identify, culture, and ability without being sufficiently informed.

The composition of the panel, however, has little to do with the personal background of presenters. The reason for presenting it in the milieu of the Diversity Luncheon is because the central precept of diversity relates not only to diversity of race, socioeconomic status, and ability, but also to diversity of life perspectives, approaches, ways of knowing, and contributions that can and should be incorporated into the discipline of ecology and ecological restoration. One group that includes BOTH types of diversity is the incarcerated. Panel presenters wished to share their experiences with luncheon attendees so that they might open their minds and consider approaching and working with groups that most ecologists do not encounter.

In addition, as stated in the panel, minorities disproportionately represent inmate populations. By raising awareness while they are incarcerated about opportunities that exist for them inside prison and when they are released from prison, we provide the potential to increase participation from these groups in the future, which is an aim of those who are interested in greater inclusiveness in our discipline of ecology.

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http://nalininadkarni.com/about/science-for-the-incarcerated/
http://bioweb.biology.utah.edu/nadkarni/

We hope this addresses your concerns.

With respect,

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Chad Naugle, Coffee Creek Corrections Center
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-----Original Message-----

From: Kennedy Rubert-nason [mailto:kfrubert@wisc.edu]
Sent: Friday, August 11, 2017 10:02 AM
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Cc: Wilnelia Recart <wilnelia.recart@gmail.com>; Sam Davis <sam@dogwoodalliance.org>; TIffany Carey <tctcarey2@gmail.com>; Aramati Casper <aramaticasper@gmail.com>
Subject: ESA diversity luncheon event

Hi Teresa (cc Wilnelia, Tiffany, Aramati, Sam),

Yesterday evening, a number of people who attended the ESA Diversity Luncheon (including SEEDS students) expressed concerns to leaders of the Inclusive Ecology section over the panelists who spoke about outreach activities through the prison system. The main concerns focused on:
1) incompatibility of prison systems and sustainability
2) inadequate diversity of races/cultures/perspectives among the panelists
3) use of inmate labor, even for a worthwhile cause

While the activities planned for the diversity luncheon were likely well-intentioned, they were not well-received, especially among younger folks. Moving forward, I think it would be worthwhile to discuss how we could tailor events at the diversity luncheon to be more respectful of the SEEDS students, whom we want to nurture and encourage to pursue science careers. One strategy could involve asking a committee of SEEDS students to provide feedback on proposed activities for the luncheon in advance. And, we should consider reaching out to all participants in this years luncheon and providing some sort of debriefing and opportunity for expression.

Regards,

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