

Andrew Wingfield
Assistant Professor
New Century College
Co-Director, Sustainability Studies Minor
703.993.4307
awingfie@gmu.edu



Ugg Boots and Ecological Footprints: Students Step into New
Sustainability Studies Minor

Sheila had several pairs of Ugg boots, in a rainbow of colors. Uggs were her favorite footwear until she enrolled in Sustainable World, the first of two core courses for Mason's new minor in Sustainability Studies. For a course project, Sheila studied the process that turned the skin of a sheep reared in an Australian pasture into the pair of cozy boots a FedEx driver dropped on her doorstep in Northern Virginia. She had always slipped on her Uggs with a feeling of pure pleasure. Through this project, those same boots became skeletons in her closet, telling a grim story of heavy fossil fuel consumption, greenhouse gas emissions, acid-polluted waterways, and exploited Chinese workers. What Sheila learned about her Uggs' outsize impact on other people and the planet changed her taste in shoes.

Sheila's classmate, Anthony, learned through an ecological footprint exercise that if all six-and-a-half billion people on Earth shared the standard of living he enjoys as a middle class American, 6.35 Earths would be required to supply the necessary resources. If, on the other hand, all six-and-a-half billion of us lived at the standard common in Anthony's father's country of birth, Pakistan, three tenths of a single Earth would suffice.

The most common definition of a sustainable society is one that meets the basic needs of the current generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. As Anthony's numbers show, we're nowhere near sustainability in the United States. That's a big problem because our exceedingly *unsustainable* lifestyle is the one to which many people in less developed parts of the world aspire. Experts project that human population will top out at nine billion around the middle of this century. How are we to honor poorer countries' desire for economic advancement, maintain a reasonable standard of living in the developed world, and, at the same time, ensure that we don't exhaust the finite natural systems that sustain us all?

Scholar Andres Edwards asserts that only a revolution will enable us to pull off such a feat. Edwards advocates a “Sustainability Revolution ... that supports economic viability and healthy ecosystems by modifying consumption patterns and implementing a more equitable social framework.”* Mason’s Sustainability Studies minor introduces students to the concepts, principles and ethical and moral issues that inform the sustainability paradigm. The minor’s curriculum integrates classroom learning, field study, and service projects in a program that prepares students to apply the sustainability perspective to their future employment, consumption decisions, and lifestyle choices, as well as to the improvement of communities in which they live.

Maybe you’re an aspiring engineer with a passion for energy efficiency. Maybe you’re a sculptor committed to making art with sustainable materials. Maybe you’re a business major with a great idea for a green enterprise. Maybe you’re into organic farming. Maybe you’re going to teach second grade and you can’t wait to inspire your students to help usher in the Sustainability Revolution. Or maybe you’re just curious about sustainability and want to learn more. Whoever you are, and whatever footwear you favor, there’s a place for you in the Sustainability Studies minor, which is open to undergraduates in all majors and to those who haven’t yet declared a major.

To complete the minor, students take the two core courses, Sustainable World and Sustainability in Action, along with three additional courses from a diverse list of pre-approved electives. Sustainable World will be offered in summer session A (as NCLC 275) and next fall (as NCLC 210). Sustainability in Action (EVPP 480) will be offered in spring, 2010. To find out about enrolling in these courses, and to learn more about the minor, please email one of the faculty Co-Directors, Andrew Wingfield in New Century College (awingfie@gmu.edu) or Dann Sklarew in Environmental Science and Policy (dsklarew@gmu.edu).

*Edwards, Andres R. *The Sustainability Revolution: Portrait of a Paradigm Shift*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2005, p. 3.