



Steward Your Space
Nature, Culture, Sustainability Studies: Core Seminar
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Introduction

Glistening dew drops, uniform height, and a green carpet that can be spotted from ten doors down. Does this remind you of the space surrounding your front door? The simple, mindless mutated grass of every urban-scape in a four-mile radius. What is not to like?

In our project, we focus on how sub/urban land stewardship and individual-scale land use can take the form of ecological resistance by reinterpreting urban land stewardship as a political act in today's world, expressed through one's yard. By rethinking private land through cultural understanding and environmental change, we can radicalize how we interact with our planet and others to better address the environmental degradation we have cultivated through modern land-use culture. Recognizing how patterns of oppression and silencing of Indigenous voices have influenced modern urban sprawl will inform our definition of land stewardship and the practices it entails. Through examination of case studies and ecological surveys, we will address the benefits and challenges regarding urban environmental restoration. Building off of learned skills throughout the Core Seminar class, such as reciprocity, community building, and equity of respect, through our creative application, we will attempt to transform the gardener into a land steward.

Land Use

Land use is as old as the human being. Defined as "the purposes and activities through which people interact with land and terrestrial ecosystems," land use, to some, identifies a human-caused disturbance on terrestrial systems; while others situate humans as integral members within the ecosystems they populate, characterizing land

use as an evolution of terrain (Ellis). Either way, humans have shaped the land we stand on since the beginning. Indigenous stewardship of North America was practiced long before the Americas were colonized, alongside indigenous peoples and practices. The current North American landscape is derived from bloodied boundaries, violent occupation of land, and states founded on settler colonialism, white supremacy, and theft of indigenous land (A. Jacobs et al.). Our current land use practices are a result of this brutality and forced invisibility. To exist in occupied North America today, we must shed light on indigenous practices that stewarded the land and where we went wrong with modern colonial land use degradation.

Land Stewardship and Indigeneity

Land Stewardship is a radical way of caring for the land to support communities of local flora and fauna to persist across the landscape and its surroundings. The act of stewardship “reflects the existence of an ecological conscience,” in turn “reflect(ing) a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land”(Leopold). In this way, it differs from conventional gardening practices, as it prioritizes matters of personal responsibility for the future of ecology and its relationship to human societies (Mumaw). Citing lawns as modern-day methods of individualization, restructuring cultural perceptions about the land as inherently communal and boundaryless is an essential point of communication with the residents of today’s grassy plot. Land ethic introduces the role of collectivity by enlarging the boundaries of community to include soil, water, plants, and animals, transforming individual responsibility into conviction for an ecological conscience (Mumaw). Current land use methods are harmful to ecology, but by looking at indigeneity as a prospect for change, how can privatized land practices contribute to benefiting our current environmental issues and self-centered culture?

Indigenous Peoples have been stewards of the land for thousands of years, viewing the land not as a commodity, but rather as a partner, teacher, healer, and spirit that sustains all life on Earth (McGregor, 2013). These beliefs and sustainable practices fostered a thriving coexistence with the land for thousands of years. Caring for the planet, along with their ‘non-human relatives’ was a crucial practice in a circular system where the planet provided food, shelter, and supplies (Lin, Stephanie Katrina). These methods of stewardship entailed never harvesting more food than was needed for consumption, returning organic materials to the ground for replenishment, engaging in sustainable agriculture, and passing down ancestral knowledge on wild habitats and their conservation. Mutual respect for the systems that fulfilled their needs was embedded in their daily living, cultural practices, and traditions. In this way, stewarding the land was ingrained into many Indigenous cultures, not only as a responsibility but as a way of living. The introduction of colonization and seizure of Indigenous lands and people by European settlers “inflicted rapid and harmful environmental changes” by prioritizing European crop monocultures, rapid deforestation, fossil fuel extraction, and agricultural exports that caused major ecological harm (Barra & Jesse). Land, native species, and people were exploited for European gain, with many native species populations across the Americas still struggling to recover.

Ecological restoration has increasingly become a site for confronting colonial and racial displacement, especially those in geographical proximity to environmental hazards (like coastal erosion and toxic exposures), often labeled “frontline communities”. In many communities, degradation of ecosystems serves not only as a loss of environmental hazard but also as a socio-ecological threat impacting important ecological, communal, and cultural relations (Barra & Jesse). Modern-day stewardship attempts are governed strictly by judicial and political powers; however, there is a significant lack of indigenous

and local voices in the conservation decision-making process (Lin, Stephanie Katrina). In the Coastal Northwest, indigenous stewardship organizations in the region, such as the Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle and the Coastal Stewardship Network, face economic, geographic, and systemic barriers preventing them from caring for their own land (Coastal First Nations-Great Bear Initiative, 2022; Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle, n.d.). Physical violence and unlawful arrests are commonplace methods of police and private enforcement on private, unceded Indigenous territory.

The displacement of Indigenous knowledge and ways of life within ecological restoration and environmental justice, common where economic considerations and private corporate land ownership are prioritized over local people's rights and interests, is reflective of historical patterns of oppression and injustice. Human rights violations demarcate every landscape we know today and are inextricably linked to colonialist ecological methods degrading human and ecological health.

Domesticated species, genetically modified organisms, and green lawns are all characteristics of the colonial power exerted on the ecosystems humans exist within. Inhabited landscapes are shaped through ecology and evolution by human land use practices, often as a reflection of a social land use regime, or "suite of cultural practices,(...) relating to land use, deployed by a given society or social group to sustain themselves" (Ellis). One such Western land use regime is that of the monotonously uniform green lawn.

Private Property and Urbanism

Modern urban suburbia exists as a gridlock of property lines and uniform monocultures. Along with a variety of invasive and destructive plant species, European settlers introduced the concept of 'private property'. The developed world has already

experienced an urban transition, with ~80% of people residing in towns and cities and over 50% of the global population residing in urban environments by 2008 (Goddard et al). From hunting and gathering to agriculture, to urbanization, the biosphere has been permanently altered by human action, impacting 75%-95% of Earth's ecosystems (Ellis). Today, land use is the leading cause of loss to biodiversity, ecosystem fragmentation, loss of native species, invasive species introduction, pollution of soil, and pollution of water (Ellis).

Private property land is often composed of many small parcels with a multitude of separate landowners, dividing ecological maintenance and restoration into fragmented portions, which decenter wider ecosystem concerns. Ecological planning and management through governments are largely reserved for large areas where they can produce the most impact. Though these public urban green spaces are often set aside to provide key terrestrial and aquatic habitat for ecological networks in metropolitan areas, the largest proportion of urban land is increasingly individually owned. As urban populations continue to rapidly increase, effective use of these spaces to provide ecological habitats becomes a priority, as there is "substantial potential for them to contribute to city-wide biodiversity and ecosystem performance" (Tratalos, Fuller, Warren, Davies, & Gaston, 2007, 314). There is a need to approach restorative conservation efforts in urban spaces as patches of interconnected habitat within a residential ecosystem rather than independent units.

Problematic Land Use

In the United States alone, green turf lawns cover 40,000 million acres of land. This is almost equivalent to the size of Washington State (Aloi). Lawns have taken over more in the last century than ever before, and now far exceed the allocated spaces that

grow corn, wheat, and fruit orchards combined (Aloi). In the 14th century, long before the word “lawn” was derived, the Old French term *lande* characterized a clearing in forested areas, often signifying barren land (Nicoll). As the term was passed down over the centuries, it slowly evolved into what we use today. In 1500s England, lawns were delineated as a symbol of status and power. Already synonymous with grass-filled patches, lawns were only affordable to the affluent class due to the massive consumption of water and labour it takes to maintain them, especially given that lawns yield no tangible assets, given that height is preserved by cutting down the plant before it seeds (Nicoll). The manicured, clean aesthetic that had developed over so many years became the post-World War II American Dream, fetishized as the suburban, masculine ideal.

While many consider the uniform green sheet bordering their homes a powerful cultural icon, it is also an ecological catastrophe. 9 billion gallons of water a day are required to maintain lawn irrigation in the US. This is nearly one-third of all residential water use, contributing to long-lasting water scarcity in vast arid areas (Peluso). Pesticide and fertilizer use, to maintain uniformity, limit natural biodiversity and create toxic runoff, which inadvertently harms other organisms and ecosystems, endangering thousands of species. Additionally, considering mowing maintenance, fertilization, and water costs of our lawns, they actually become sources of carbon emission rather than sequestration (Gillman et al.). All in all, grassy yards are not the national hero we think them to be.

Racialized systems of land management are ever-present in the American landscape, with grass scapes still inaccessible to some and not offered to others. Even the small green carpet offered outside of some residential homes is a luxury throughout many tightly-packed western urban neighborhoods, preventing access to the slightest hint of nature. Meanwhile, homeowners and other neighborhood associations maintain strict regulations on what is expected from each resident's lawn, promoting forced

integration into American ideals. By applying its “formal homogeneity (and) universal vernacular of power,” the lawn has been a way to communicate “reliability, constancy, efficiency, confidence, and trust,” for decades (Aloi). Rooting this symbol in nationalism, classism, colonialism, and racism, the lawn is much more than a patch of barren land.

“The lawn is first and foremost, a cultural field of intensities, discourses, power relations, genealogies, rhetoric, and ideologies,” (Aloi). Its symbolism benefits from a competitive mindset and social uniformity commonplace in capitalistic cultures. Today, lawns continue to send implicit messaging about who belongs in a space meant only for those who conform to a harmful environmental ideal and lack care or reciprocity for surrounding species.

A Changing Landscape

Attitudes toward lawn care are beginning to shift as counties and states across the country have begun to notice grass lawns effect on cities’ stormwater management, soil erosion, or other environmental concerns. Montgomery County, Maryland, has offered residents financial stipends in return for redesigning lawns to include underground rain barrels, and Minnesotan governance has begun programs for pollinator gardens to replace the green yard (Ponsford). Front yard gardens and rewilding attempts are a start to radical forms of decolonizing individual land, calling back to centuries-old indigenous methods of land stewardship while still in the colonial language of privatization.

Potentials of the ‘Lawn’

Garden habitats in urban environments have the opportunity to serve as hospitable ‘islands’ for local urban ecology, benefiting population numbers of everything from pollinators to suburban songbirds. Insect population studies on the insect orders Diptera (flies) and Coleoptera (bees, wasps, ants), important pollinating groups, showed

a positive correlation between species richness and restored area size within these urban ‘islands’ in San Francisco (McFrederick & Gretchen LeBuhn). Through land stewardship, communal care, and conversion of sub-/urban grass lawns into native species and treescapes, carbon absorption and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions can make a substantial impact on the atmosphere and ecosystem. A 2023 study showed that “If unused lawns were planted with trees, a gigaton of carbon could be removed from the atmosphere over two decades” (Gillman et al.). Eleven native shrub species have proven to sequester more carbon than the average lawn space emits. Even over time, as shrubbery carbon sequestration reaches net zero, and populations increase, urban maintenance of biomass can play a crucial role in carbon balancing. Felled and pruned foliage can serve important roles in material sourcing for local furniture and offer potentials for cyclic processes of urbanization through land stewardship and communal care.

While landscaping and horticulture offer many opportunities to increase species diversity in a given area, it is important to consider the implications of imported and native species. Many of the popular ornamental species of horticultural plants were imported specifically for their unpalatability to native insects, as part of the effort of achieving the ideal ‘pest-free’ garden. Non-native plants drive population declines of native species, including common birds (e.g., Narango et al. 2018) and particularly insect populations (e.g., Tallamy et al. 2021). Most insect herbivores can only consume plant species with which they share an evolutionary history (Tallamy). Insects play some of the most important roles in ecosystems, as decomposers, food sources, and pollinators. As most animals depend on insect protein as either a primary or secondary food source, including humans, ‘a land with fewer insects is a land without higher life’ (Tallamy). Lawns consisting of native grasses and flowers not only provide biodiversity restoration in

impacted urban areas, but are also more resistant to environmental degradation, erosion, temperature fluctuation, and human disturbance than imported species. Native cultivars of grass require less maintenance due to centuries of adaptation to the environment, pests, and diseases.

Turning Urban Gardeners into Land Stewards

Gardening and regenerative methods of land use are not radical acts, but within today's context, they can become acts of change for the betterment of the environment we all live in. A case study explored how a purposefully chosen wildlife gardening program affected participants' self-reported gardening behaviour, feelings of wellbeing, and connections to nature and place (Yin). Land stewardship is not only impactful for the environment, but is a “rewarding and productive engagement with other life forms and the opportunities to exercise virtues of nurture and care,” strengthening connections between nature, place, and wellbeing (Mumaw).

Restoration efforts and green infrastructure in urban landscapes have been linked to a variety of human physical health and social benefits, particularly associated with domestic urban gardens (Cameron et al., 2012). A qualitative study in Australia (Mumaw) explored various methods of encouraging urban restoration and documented the resulting benefits of transforming urban gardeners into land stewards. Their research followed several local stewardship programs that worked with and within urban communities, finding evidence that urban private land stewardship performed by amateur to experienced gardeners can readily be fostered through community programs and resources. Urban gardeners turned land stewards build a stronger urban residential relationship with nature, their community, and food. These land stewardship programs introduced residents to the potential of their gardening to contribute to species

conservation, as well as ongoing advice and access to materials. Residents in local areas showed readiness to care for the land, simply needing guidance and community to encourage their stewardship.

Many similar programs and initiatives have been implemented in urban areas across various parts of the world. Environmental restoration efforts practiced by members of local communities are effective, as each city has its own unique set of native resources, community, and problems that can be addressed through environmental stewardship. We both come from very different geographical, cultural, and political environments, and so we were interested in specifically examining stewardship initiatives in our hometowns as part of our exploration, as well as engaging in the stewardship practice of personal responsibility.

Louisville, Kentucky, is the 29th-worst ozone-polluted city in the nation. Increasing use of privatized vehicles and pollution from industries in the region have contributed to unprecedented levels of nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds in the atmosphere in recent years (Keith). Regional sunlighting patterns and air circulation in the valley region do nothing to aid the city's atmosphere, bringing nearby pollutants to the area and creating an exaggerated form of the urban heat island effect. This causes the city to receive intensely differentiated climates and temperatures compared to the surrounding rural areas. Ozone depletion can cause further damage to vegetated ecosystems through the absorption of air-borne pollutants, as well as impacting heart and lung-related human health. Heart disease, lung cancer, and heat stroke have all increased in the Louisville metropolitan area in recent years as a direct result of these increasing temperatures (Keith). Stewardship of carbon sequestering,

porous greenscapes, and shared exterior shade can have direct effects on these issues, allowing for human and environmental benefit.

Other opportunities for Kentucky urban land use are reflected through reeducation efforts by “Native Yardening” in Northern Kentucky. This regenerative consulting service and community training space helps gardeners “*transition* from using outdated and harmful but status quo *techniques* to regenerating the land and using their yards to improve the health of our planet” (Reed). Through a weekly digital substack, easily digestible articles are communicated to inform the everyday resident of the potential for stewarding the land. Topics such as native species to the area, financially conscious solutions, and living in harmony with organisms populate the archive and allow accessible self-teaching methods for Kentuckians to be transformed from gardeners into land stewards.

Pet cemeteries also offer a source of organic matter while connecting communities together and with the ground under their feet. This method also acts as an introduction to indigenous philosophies of life and afterlife, cultivating a circularity of care and respect as the land offers sustenance and shelter for the dead and living alike. The benefit of soil retention from pet cemeteries allows for chemical-free decomposition and recenters the mindset of a return to earth for collective stewards (Reed).

Similar restorative practices have been implemented in Vancouver, Canada. In 2022, the municipal government launched the Greenest City 2020 Action Plan, an urban policy that aims for the city of Vancouver to be one of the ‘greenest’ cities in the world by 2020 through creating green jobs and reducing carbon emissions. The initiative not only aims to create policies to reduce the city's carbon footprint but also emphasizes municipal and community participation and responsibility to minimize personal ecological footprints. Through this policy, several non-profit community organizations,

such as the Environmental Education and Stewardship Task Force, work cooperatively with the Park Board and government to produce and carry out action plans benefiting the urban ecology, daily living, conservation of natural spaces, and creation of sustainable policies. This goal has spurred the development of several related strategies as well, including the Biodiversity Strategy, Urban Forest Strategy, Green Operations Environmental Framework, the Vancouver Food Strategy, the Healthy City for All Action Plan, and the Environmental Education and Stewardship Action Plan, all of which continue to work collaboratively with community-led organizations and collectives.

Gardening and community stewardship as a radical act to combat local and environmental issues is not new to the city. Food policy and accessibility have long been a central issue in Vancouver. Food (2,636,850 tonnes) contributes the largest component to the ecological footprint (4,514,400 gha) in the Greater Vancouver area, which includes crop and grazing land on the outskirts of the city as well as carbon sinks required to sequester emissions from food production and distribution (Moore et al). In an effort to combat food inaccessibility, rising grocery prices, and to foster connection and community to agricultural sources, community gardens maintained by local gardening collectives have popped up along streets, parks, and empty lots. There are currently over 110 community gardens and orchards in City parks, on schoolyards, and on private property in Vancouver.

While it is fortunate that the plethora of natural spaces and the implementation of environmentally conscious policies of the city, it is essential to note that Vancouver's tourism industry heavily relies on preserving ecological beauty, and thus, there are economic influences that play a large role in environmentally conscious municipal policy making. There is a long history of colonial injustice rooted in the development of the area that is still present today, and the significant population of Musqueam, Squamish, and

Tsleil-Waututh people in the area still struggle to have their environmental concerns heard, especially in regards to oil, mining, and logging practices just outside of the city.

Creative Solution

While the history of privatized land use centers colonial mindsets, othering subjects, and ecological harm, our projects pull from ideas of indigenous land stewardship practices, such as cyclical processes and native ecology, to recenter community care and encourage the betterment of our ecosystems.

Land stewardship is a practice that benefits all parties involved in its participation, and case studies have continued to show that with the right policies, education, encouragement, and resources available to communities, residents are ready and enthusiastic about doing their part. Our intention for our creative application is to create an informative poster/map and zine that would help an aspiring land steward to plan out their urban garden. Through combined research, local studies, and indigenous inspirations, our project looks to transform individual lawn ownership into reciprocal community land stewards in an effort of environmental and social regeneration.

The illustrated map poster created by Serena proposes potential garden layout opportunities and effective space use on urban properties. The map will illustrate opportunities for laying out an urban garden space to benefit local urban ecology. Examples in the map design include introducing alternatives to turf lawn, usages for shady spots, growing vegetables and edible plants, and the importance of providing coverage for songbirds. The map is relatively simple and meant to inspire a more general audience on ways to benefit their local ecology and promote ecological restoration in their own space.

Sitting within this 'garden' is a house-shaped zine made from recycled paper from RISD's Loop Lab, designed by Fiona. Within the structure of the household holds a zine that expands further on the concept of land stewardship, what it entails, and the exact species and techniques that may be employed. The front major face folds outwards into accordion-style page folds, while inside lies a packet of native seeds to the local ecosystem in which the zine is distributed. Not only is the material sourcing within the project important, but the creation as a form of zine. The history of zine-making is rooted in anti-capitalistic, community-oriented ways of local and indigenous knowledge building. Popularized during the 1970s environmental activist movements in Western Europe, zines are characterized by the denouncement of overarching policy making and criticized popular ways of living and operating, uplifting communal values and cooperation through everyday life (Gimeno-Sánchez). Utilizing this educational technique of alternative knowledge dissemination, this zine encapsulates the concepts of a decolonial, anti-establishment, and environmentally conscious approach, propagating a new radical rethinking of the space in front of your door.

Throughout the pages of the zine, stewardship is defined and centralized, laying out steps and solutions for communities and individuals to take to transform their yard. Topics touch on resistance through lawn politics, highlighting the fact that ecological conservation needs large amounts of manpower that only a caring community of land stewards can achieve when we are not able to rely on government systems. The version shown outlines ideal species for New England sandy, loam clay soils in shaded and sunny spots, referencing the importance of native species. Composting and animal cemetery systems take up the last two spreads, leaving with a call to action for the reader to take up the seeds already conveniently located within the zine and change the output of their lawn.

Conclusion

Purposes and activities with which people interact with the ecosystems, organisms, and soil around them have been in place since the beginning of humankind, but we have not always treated the land or others well. Land Stewardship acts as a form of reciprocity to all that we exist with and within, offering care and support for the continued survival of the space and living things. This action reflects a personal and communal responsibility for the health of the land and others, something that indigenous peoples have been practicing for thousands of years. In this relationship, the land becomes a teacher, a healer, and a partner with whom we give and take to and from for all existence.

Modern-day colonial ecology tactics, however, have set out to undermine these philosophies altogether, with much help from the green residential lawn. European settlers introduced concepts of private property along with invasive species to ecosystems in North America. This idealization of the American lawn exists within a cultural field of power relations and nationalist symbolism, benefiting from a competitive, individualistic, and uniform social mindset.

Creating infographic media works which depict, in poster and zine form, the importance of lawns as a tactic for biodiversity, soil retention, and community, we can communicate to the broader society what it means to exist on a political, violent narrative of stolen land and ecosystem destruction. By recalling stewarding practices and turning modern gardeners into land stewards, lawns can be transformed into productive engagements with other life forms and an opportunity to exercise virtues of nurture and care for nature, place, wellbeing, and others.

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