INTRODUCTION

In October of 2010, at the groundbreaking of BrightSource Energy’s Ivanpah Solar Electric Generating System, then governor Arnold Schwarzenegger stated, “Some people look out into the desert and see miles and miles of emptiness. I see miles and miles of gold mine.” This statement was but the climax of an ongoing debate about the development of utility-scale solar facilities on public lands in the southwest deserts following the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, which stated among its objectives investments in renewable energy technologies and environmental protection capable of providing long-term economic benefits.

Since 2009, The Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) has seen a 34% increase in its total revenue, insuring that sustainability would become an important concept in any educator’s curriculum. Yet, Schwarzenegger’s determination of desert landscapes as either ‘emptiness’ or ‘gold mine’ draws attention to an interrelated set of questions in our response to global climate change, which ecologies matter? That is, how do we determine the value of an ecosystem in questions of conservation, development, and disposability? How is ‘sustainability’ reflected by the rhetoric of ‘green’ and how does this affect public perceptions of the southwest deserts of U.S. when, traditionally, deserts have been understood as barren wastelands, almost uninhabitable by any form of life?

ACCESSING STUDENT KNOWLEDGE

Writing, 3RC, Argument, and Research, is the second of UCI’s two required writing courses for undergraduate students. The course focuses on critical reading and rhetoric and teaches students intellectual strategies for identifying, understanding, and using various genres and rhetorical situations for important communicative purposes. The purpose is to help students deepen their understandings of rhetoric and communication by teaching them how to conduct research and to evaluate and use various types of evidence. The reading, composing, and researching practices they learn in this course and the various intellectual strategies they develop prepare them for future course, while requiring that they engage in the university community and their respective disciplines, as well deepen their perspectives of current issues and problems, and the idea of social justice itself.

To most of my students, the questions, concepts, and requirements of the course can be overwhelming, especially as we deal with social, political, and economic terms and analyze that they might not be familiar with. In order to help mitigate student anxiety, the course is designed to access the knowledge students have prior to the course.

SEEING THE DESERT

Because “Ecologies that Matter” is a course designed with particular attention paid to the southwest deserts of the U.S., especially as they factor into our collective visions of sustainable futures, many student projects are global desert ecosystems – in the U.S. but also in Central and South America, Africa, and China – as case studies to begin their analyses. Because students are often unfamiliar with desert landscapes, this means they have to develop not only the critical vocabulary for understanding their research topics, but perhaps more importantly, skills for seeing the desert as more than either ‘emptiness’ or ‘gold mine.’ Here’s an exercise I like to do with my students, and one I invite you to participate in now.

Because desert landscapes are often understood as irrational or even antithetical to problems of sustainability, the Steele-Burnerd Anza-Borrego Desert Research Center will become even more valuable to the American public, in general, and UC researchers and California residents, in particular. The Anza-Borrego community, which in my time with Water UC has been an inspiring example of collective engagement and activity, can use it in partnership with UC Irvine to not only further research in the natural sciences, but to educate students of all levels about ways of seeing the biological and cultural complexity of its desert landscape.

TEACHING “THE DESERT” IN SUSTAINABILITY PEDAGOGY

These are the questions I explore in an Argument & Research course titled “Ecologies that Matter.” A majority of my students are international students with little to no familiarity with the southwest deserts of the United States. In fact, when asked what desertscapes come to mind when they hear the word “desert,” the words they use are not far off from Schwarzenegger’s determination. Adjectives like “empty,” “barren,” “unlivable,” “desolate,” as well as iconography like cacti, tumbleweeds, Joshua trees, and vultures are often used. Furthermore, when asked what desertscapes come to mind when they hear words like “sustainability” and “environmental conservation,” students often reference the Amazonian rainforests, the California redwoods, and water-based ecosystems.

The purpose of this class is to get students to critically assess the discourse and politics of sustainability, and a complex, interdisciplinary engagement with desert ecosystems is an effective tool for such assessments.

CONCLUSIONS

As sustainability becomes a more and more important topic in the curriculum of higher education, questions about which ecologies matter in our visions of sustainable futures should continue to be addressed.

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