Summary of Co-curricular Activities (2014)

Teaming Workshop with Mary Hurlie (June 21): Alex Cort

The very qualified Mary Hurlie lead us in discussion and a series of exercises that established a foundational level of trust within the group and taught the power of group negotiation. We started the workshop with an icebreaker and some basic discussion of emotional quotient, EQ. Our first exercise broke us out into three groups where we identified and presented on aspects of trust building within a team. We then moved onto a mission developed by the astronauts at central control themselves, NASA. We ranked fifteen items based on their importance to a failed landing on the moon. First individually and then in our groups, we came up with a numerically ranked list of items essential to survival. Following this break out session, we reconvened to get the official ranking and summed up the workshop with Mary.

This workshop ties directly into the school’s curriculum by creating a base level of leadership training that will be important in projects going forward. Furthermore, it creates a level of trust within a group that is not present in a normal academic setting. This is what makes the School of the Environment unique is its ability to break free of the traditional binds of academia and cultivate learning through application.

Snake Mountain (June 21): Kaitlin (Finky) Fink

From a distance, it’s easy to see how Snake Mountain got its name: a series of undulating, terrace-like hills winds upwards from the town of Addison below, culminating in a long, flat ridge that overlooks the whole of the Champlain Valley and the Adirondack Mountains beyond. It was here that we, the students of the inaugural session of Middlebury’s School of the Environment, found ourselves on a quintessential Vermont summer afternoon: sunshine, a light breeze, and comfortable mid-60’s temperatures. It was fitting to kick off our first full day of the program outdoors, getting a first-hand look at the region on which we are about to commence six weeks of intensive study.

Besides offering a taste of the ubiquitous outdoor recreational opportunities in the area, this hike served to situate us in both the physical and cultural environment of this area. Along the way up, we made several stops in order to take note of the forest through which the trail traversed: Steve provided some basic tree identification lessons, but stressed that, more than memorizing specifics, we should
begin to get a sense, an intuition, of what a northern hardwood forest feels like. When we emerged from the woods, we found ourselves on a concrete platform – the site of an old tourist hotel, which has since burned to the ground – and were met with a stunning view of the entire valley. Steve first allowed us time to simply take in the landscape, to get a feel for our broader surroundings in the same way that we had internalized a sense of the forest on our way to the summit. We were instructed to consider the scene before us not as a stagnant photograph, but rather as a single frame in a movie – one brief moment in an ever-changing, ever-moving reel; the only moment that we all will be privileged to witness. Bits and pieces of the whole, the story of this area, were revealed to us: we learned how glaciers had once blanketed everything within sight, including the ground upon which we sat; we learned how, later, geological shifts caused the sea to come rushing into this valley, how Snake Mountain was likely an island in this region of the ocean; we learned how extensive sheep farming turned forested land into pasture, and how subsequent removal of the sheep allowed the forest to return; we learned about the balance and tensions between public and private ownership of land in this area in the modern day. It was as if, on the summit, we were being shown brief clips of the longer film – just enough to get us curious, to leave us wanting more.

Up on the summit of Snake Mountain, we found our study site, our research subject – our home for the summer – laid out before us, and we were able to develop a broad sense of this area as it is in this moment. Our task for the summer will be, to the best of our ability, to try to recreate and understand the full story of this place: how it came to be how it is, what factors are currently shaping its development and movement, and what direction it is likely to take in the future.

Opening Ceremony (June 22): Marjeela Basij-Rasihk

I cannot think of any other perfect place for holding the opening ceremony of Middlebury School of the Environment, except the organic garden. Organic garden was the most appropriate place for welcoming the new students, faculties, and stuffs. Sitting there on top of the hill, surrounded by nature, under clear and sunny sky, having a great view of Middlebury College and BiHall from far away, encircled by various types of plants and trees, seeing the sunshine beaming through the clouds, birds singing in the background while listening to the director of the program, the president, and the vice president of the college talk – being in that kind of open environment with natural scene just reinforced me more to think and hear beyond the words that was coming at me from the podium. I think opening ceremony is the most crucial part of any new beginning because it sets the tune for all the participants (both students and faculty) for what to expect from the program. In this case, opening ceremony was a great time where the participants were reminded once again about the mission and vision of SoE program and to think about “why are you here”?

Besides the choice of location, the choice of the content of the opening ceremony speech(es) matters: the content of the speech grounds the participants. Steve Trombulak’s opening speech was like looking through a small window into the next six weeks of School of the Environment. From the very beginning he posed
reflected and thought provoking questions as such: *where do you come from and how do you understand the narration of the place you live in? Where are you now? Asking us to think about the system of organic farm and what are our interaction with the Organic Farm then when we were having the opening ceremony and also in the future. And finally the most important question: why are you here? Through the opening ceremony, Professor Trombulak alerted us to be mindful and to give all the seriousness that SoE deserves. He reminded us that we are the chosen “leaders”. Thus, leadership comes with responsibilities and so in a way he encouraged us students to get ready for SoE and to think about what are our responsibilities as active participants of this program during the next six weeks at SoE. Professor Trombulak reminded me of the most important message by reading the following poem by Mary Oliver:

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.

Sometimes we get so caught up with the business of our daily schedule, studying, work, and other responsibilities that it give us an excuse of thinking always just from the mind and forgetting about listening to our heart. Professor Trombulak emphasized on living a compassionate life and working both with our minds and hearts throughout life. Not forget to mention, at the end of ceremony the SoE started a fantastic and honorable ritual: planting tree a tree as a group in the organic farm, and then pouring a sip of maple vinegar water from a jar on the ground while sharing a group who it is that we are honoring and representing today. This was a perfect way to end the ceremony while leaving us with a great impression and some more thoughts to ponder on.

*Workshop on Leadership and Communication Styles with Mary Hurlie (June 24): Jess Parker*

Mary Hurlie, of LeaderScope Consulting, recently led us in a workshop focusing on different leadership and communication styles. Before arriving at Middlebury this summer, we each completed an online assessment that gauged our unique leadership style. The communication/leadership style assessment tool, called the ‘DiSC’, outlines four distinctive leadership styles: the driver, influencer, steady-stabilizer, and critical thinker. The driver tends to be direct, decisive, action-oriented, and communicates in clear and concise language. People with a predominant influencer style are usually optimistic, creative, team-builders, and focus their energy on building relationships. The steady-stabilizer, which Mary affectionately referred to as ‘the rock’, is an empathic listener, helps others around him/her, and focuses on ensuring strong relationships. Finally, the critical thinker employs an analytical, precise, and data-driven style and pays close attention to the rules and regulations. While we each exhibited a core style, Mary emphasized that
the four types are fluid and we all pull from each style. Different styles also bring different strengths to a group, and recognizing those strengths in ourselves and in others can amplify the effectiveness of our collective impact.

A central theme of the workshop was the skill of flexing: the ability to read the needs of a situation and the dominant style of the individual(s) with whom you are working with and adjusting your own behavior to communicate in a way that will be most meaningful to them. In other words, “Do unto others as they’d like done unto them” (The Platinum Rule, Tony Alessandra). During the workshop, we each identified our core style and worked together as groups to identify and share modes of communication that we respond positively to when working in a team. Knowing and understanding the leadership and communications style of our fellow students in the School of the Environment will be an invaluable tool as we begin to work on group projects in the Sustainability Practicum. An awareness of our own unique style and the styles of the people we interact with will increase our ability to communicate effectively and implement change in the world beyond our time here this summer.

Workshop on Writing Op-Ed pieces with Bill McKibben (June 24): Eliot Neal

The School for the Environment was honored to have Bill McKibben, founder of 350.org and popular environmentalist, join us on Tuesday evening for a workshop on writing op-ed pieces. McKibben is something of a media wizard, and can often be seen on television or gracing the pages of well-known newspapers and magazines. Needless to say, he knows how to get his message across. One of his best tools is the op-ed piece. His talk outlined some of the basic guidelines for writing an op-ed piece, and revealed what helps to make an op-ed successful and widely read. Critiquing examples of op-eds that both he and others had written, McKibben taught us how to avoid some of the common pitfalls that plague op-ed pieces. We will be working with McKibben later in the program when we write our own op-eds in our elective classes.

One of the major focuses here at the School for the Environment is the power of communication. It is not enough to simply measure, say, levels of pollutants in Lake Champlain. You must then be able to translate that hard data into language that everyone can understand. Additionally, if you wish to enact any change, you must be able to get the attention of people who can make that change happen. As we learned from McKibben, one of the most effective ways to do this is to write an op-ed. By acquiring the necessary skills to communicate information and ideas, we will be much more prepared to tackle the environmental issues that we have explored in the SOE.

Conversation with Kenny Williams of Operation Green Thumb (June 26): Joseph Interligi

The students of Middlebury’s School of the Environment meet with a Middlebury alum, Kenny Williams, for a guest lecture. Mr. Williams spoke to us for about two hours on a wide range of topics. The focus of the lecture was around his work with
community gardens inside of New York City. He began by telling us a story of how he started doing work with community gardens even before graduating from Middlebury University. In his junior year he created one of these gardens from the ground up at a middle school in Brooklyn New York. With his structure plan and dedication to seeing success this garden is still in operation today. Following his story and description of his current work for the park and recreations department of New York City the floor was opened up to a fulfilling round of Q&A.

Kenny Williams lecture fell right in line with our course curriculum by expressing how the lessons we are learning now in regards to the environment and implementing change are employed in the working world. Knowing the knowledge is important but you have to be willing to put that knowledge to work. The “sweat equity” you must dedicate into a project or idea, as Mr. Williams most eloquently stated, is one of the most important aspects of executing change. You cannot just talk the talk you must be willing to walk the walk as well.

**Workshop on Persuasive Speaking with Mike Kiernan** (June 30): Dylan McGarthwaite

Earlier this week we had a delightful visit from Mike Kiernan to talk about persuasive communication. He opened by stating that our goal was to turn “inertia into activation.” Mike began by sharing three of the most important secrets or guidelines to persuasive communication. The first secret was to simply have three secrets and by that he meant have a basic structure that you will follow to get your point across. The second was the power of silence. He advised us to watch various examples of great speeches and to notice the strategic pauses that are applied. His third secret was that the design and delivery of the presentation should be centered on the understanding of the perception apparatus and psychological state of the audience. Mike proceeded to give us a bonus secret, which was to be a minimalist when using visuals in your presentation.

Mike’s persuasive workshop was highly relevant to our curriculum as we work to become proficient leaders and communicators. Public speaking in itself is intimidating, especially when you are faced with the challenge of trying to persuade your audience. We have learned throughout the first two weeks that there will be moments in our professional lives when we may be called on unexpectedly or on short notice to pitch a presentation. Mike informed us that there are two things to keep in mind when being called on unexpectedly to speak in public. These two steps are to name the transaction, why are we here, and name the emotion of the audience. It was a tremendous experience to work with Mike, his knowledge and expertise was effective in creating a comfortable atmosphere for the class in which we were able to practice and execute his three secrets.

**Workshop on Scenario Planning with Jack Byrne** (July 1): Isaac Baker

On Tuesday, July 1, the students of Middlebury’s School of the Environment sat down with Jack Byrne for a 3.5-hour workshop on Scenario Planning. The process he taught was developed by Shell as a way of considering and planning for multiple futures in a complex world that is full of uncertainties. Putting theory into practice,
Jack split us up into three groups and gave us Middlebury College Dining Services and its ongoing commitment to sourcing local, ethically produced, sustainable food as an example. In the hours that followed, we worked with the STEEP chart (social, technological, environment, economic, and political) to brainstorm possible changes related to the College’s local food sourcing, identified the most important uncertainties to plan around, imagined four possible futures using those uncertainties as our two axes, and finally created newspaper headlines looking 20 years out based on one of the futures.

The exercise was a direct introduction to our work in the Sustainability Practicum course, but is also relevant to all of our other work and thinking this summer. Scenario Planning is part of the toolbox for collaboration and integrative thinking, both of which are at the heart of the school’s mission. In the practicum course, we will take this tool to the next level by applying it to our own team-based projects focused on the College’s climate adaptation strategies. Scenario Planning creates a social framework for thinking outside the box and working to address the environmental challenges at hand in a holistic manner, recognizing that future success will be measured only in our ability collectively engage in systems-thinking. Tuesday’s workshop was our first glimpse of this important strategy.

Lecture on Environmental Art: Exploration and Collaboration by Martin Bridge (July 1): Charlotte Ahern

This week, Middlebury School of the Environment’s Artist-in-Residence, Martin Bridge, gave a presentation on Art and the Environment to the Middlebury community. Martin officially displayed the original piece he had created for the school this summer, which will also used on the school’s t-shirt! The symbol he chose for the design is the Nautilus, one of the oldest species in the world. Although the Nautilus has survived every major mass extinction, it is now threatened due to human interest in obtaining their shells.

The first part of Martin’s presentation consisted of a general overview of artists who either fall into the category of environmental art, or art that interacts with the environment. From the large-scale earthworks of Robert Smith to less environmentally impactful land art of Andy Goldworthy, Martin provided us with a context of the broad range of artists within the context of the environment.

In terms of his own work, Martin’s spiritual journey as an Animist influences his art. Ranging in mediums from painting to sculpture, he sees spiritual worth in all things, recognizing how complex and mysterious the interconnectedness of life is. In addition to his enthusiasm for mushrooms, he specifically shared his passion for Permaculture: an ecological design that mimics natural systems. Through the replication of these systems, permaculture heals the inflicted damage of the Earth through regeneration. The principles of Permaculture tie in with John Ehrenfeld and Andrew Hoffman’s “Flourishing: A Frank Conversation About Sustainability”, one of our course books this summer. The idea of flourishing is a visualization of growth and completeness for both humans and other life that is everlasting. Differing from the Brundtland eco-efficiency definition of sustainability, Permaculture and Flourishing are restorative to the entirety of the Earth through creation.
Using imagery as opposed to words opens up a space for interpretation. Martin attends various kinds events such as music festivals, creating art in the moment. He finds that type of environment is extremely affective, for when someone approaches you with questions, they’re already more receptive and open. In the context of our program this summer, this point of view is a refreshing and inspirational approach to creating change in the world. Rather than stating one’s opinion, art evokes emotion through the spirit and the heart. Martin defines art as something that is done with passion and beauty; he asks us to live an “artful life”— to inspire people to think about their environment in a more conscious way.

*Lecture/Workshop on Media and the Environment by Jason Mittell (July 3):* Eleanor Bennett

When I heard that Jason Mittell, Professor of Film and Media Culture at Middlebury and well-known author, was coming to join the School of the Environment as part of our guest lecture series last week, I got very excited. While I have not yet had the chance to take one of Mittell’s classes, the general sentiment among Middlebury students is that he is an inspiring professor whose courses are highly relevant to anyone not living under a rock. While I expected a lecture out of the ordinary, I did not expect that we would spend the first fifteen minutes watching and critically analyzing the recently popularized YouTube video, “Baby Monkey Riding Backwards on A Pig.”

Much to my surprise, this short piece—which has over 20 million views and features exactly what the title suggests—provided the perfect intro to our lecture and discussion with Mittell on the possibilities and pitfalls of video as a tool for environmental advocacy. As Mittell pointed out, all successful creators of video, whether their focus is pure entertainment (think Baby Monkey) or environmental activism, must continually ask themselves two guiding questions:

*Who is my audience?*
*What am I trying to do with that audience?*

After exploring in depth these questions along with the unique elements of video that make the medium both a promising tool for environmental advocacy and also a risky one, Mittell closed our session with an experiential component. In small groups we were given ten minutes to come up with a short video pitch and two minutes to convince our peers that our video was worth creating. Final ideas ranged in topic from climate change, to a middle school garden, to the daily life of one man fracking in Arkansas.

As we embark on our final projects for the next four weeks, it will be crucial to remind ourselves that we are capable of the creativity and innovation that fueled our ten-minute brainstorming session with Mittell. A major focus of the School of the Environment is on empowering students with the skills and confidence necessarily to go out and “do real things” and to make a difference—it is clear that our time with Mittell embodied this mission.
Workshop on Interviewing and Audio Recording, Part 1 by Erin Davis (July 8): Dana Kluchinski

We began the workshop with each student sharing what they have recently listened to. Responses varied from music, NPR, podcasts, café sounds, birds chirping, to breathing while underwater. Listening is a skill that takes practice and focus. We all need to work on listening whether it is to what others are saying, or what they are not saying. Listening is a practice of absorbing when impulse is to expel.

Erin Davis discussed different types of audio media such as podcasting, internet radio, and radio stories. She talked about how to frame audio stories, and showed us examples that used different techniques to tell a story. Interview style and editing are choices that can change how a story is told. There are layers to the audio experience such as including the voice of the interviewer, adding music, or using a track for background noise. These are tools to enhance the story and audience experience.

Communication has been a buzzword in the School of the Environment. Interviews are ways to effectively communicate someone else’s narrative that you feel is important, unheard, or that better articulates a point you want to make. There are stories to be heard within our research and many times we need to ask questions of the people who have a better understanding of what we want to know. In order to gather information we need to ask questions, and know what questions to ask.

We then had the opportunity to interview each other. These were recorded conversations between students in different elective classes. I learned that it is vital to listen to your interviewee’s answers carefully in order to develop effective follow up questions. Interviewing is about listening to someone to hear their story, and the reality they are experiencing. We live in such a visual world today that sometimes we forget how to listen.

Workshop on Interviewing and Audio Recording, Part 2 by Erin Davis (July 9): Kate Eiseman

The art of listening persisted as a theme in the second session of our workshop with Erin Davis. Each student returned to the recorded interviews from the day before, embarrassed by the strange sound of his own voice, surprised to hear that she asked question that her interviewee had already answered. We returned to our work from the day before in hopes of learning from it. There would be no opportunity for improvement had we simply recorded and moved on.

Next week, we will spend an afternoon capturing several narratives surrounding our understanding of Lake Champlain. Hopefully, our newfound self-awareness will improve the quality of those interviews. We have learned of the importance of preparation, both of the technology and our own intentions and questions. We focused on the power of an anecdote and the possibility for the personal to become transformative in reflection on lessons learned and perspective gained. And, again and again, we are reminded to listen. Closely. To what is said and, as Dana writes
too, to what is not said. Slow down, leave space, create an opportunity for something (or somebody) new.

Workshop on Networking by Mike Kiernan and Liz Robinson (July 9): Jess Parker

The very thought of networking is usually enough to make us cringe. Thoughts of standing awkwardly by the food table as you try to make conversation with a potential employer can induce sweaty palms. Thankfully, Liz Robinson and Mike Kiernan led us in a networking workshop at 51 Main that addressed some of our major anxieties when it comes to making connections at various events. We discussed a variety of topics, including entering and exiting a conversation, having a firm handshake, following up with people after an event, how to dress, and being prepared for a gathering. One point that I found particularly useful was that you should be persistent in your follow up with individuals who you have connected with. As long as you maintain a respectful tone, it is completely acceptable to send multiple emails to someone if you do not receive a timely response. You can even pick up the phone and call an individual if email proves to be a challenge. Professionals are busy people; showing that you are genuinely interested in maintaining contact will reflect positively on you. Overall, we discussed being confident, prepared, and courteous in our interactions during and after a networking event.

We were able to test out our new skills immediately following the workshop when we were joined by community members for an informal cocktail hour. Equipped with our newfound networking knowledge, we enjoyed socializing with professionals from a variety of different backgrounds. As we begin to think about our career paths after college, being able to network effectively will certainly expand our potential job opportunities in the future.

Conversation with Bill McKibben of 350.org (July 11): Eleanor Bennett

Last week the faculty and students of the School of the Environment were honored to have lunch with a very special guest—Bill McKibben. A professor in residence at Middlebury College and a long time Vermont local, McKibben is most celebrated as the founder of 350.org and the author of numerous highly acclaimed environmental books.

McKibben began our hour-long question and answer session by taking us back to his first real breakthrough in writing. He was twenty-one at the time, working for the New Yorker, and he decided to write a piece on where every item in his New York City apartment came from. By “came from” I don't mean the corner store where he bought his toaster—I mean the electricity in the outlet that the toaster plugs into. McKibben’s relentless curiosity took him on a journey to a myriad of unexpected places from an oil refinery in Brazil to New York City’s underground water system. As McKibben described it, “I became aware for the first time of the undeniable physicality of what had before been invisible parts of the city I lived in.” While I have seen McKibben speak many times, I had never heard a recounting of this experience before.
Not only did McKibben’s story provide a fascinating window into a pivotal moment in his activist life, I think the story resonated well with the mission of the School of the Environment. One of the most valuable skills we have been honing this summer is the ability to look at the world not as a map of isolated parts, but as a series of interconnected systems. In the same way that McKibben traced the oil in his stove to a much larger, global oil system—we have been working on mapping how the college’s resources (i.e. energy, food, and water) fit into a larger systems. Finally, as a group of college students looking to make a positive change in the world, but feeling overwhelmed by the scale and complexity of the worlds systems, we asked McKibben what kept him going on his mission to combat climate change. His answer was simple, “There’s really no choice—like fascism in Europe and slavery in the United States—climate change is not going away on it’s own.”

**Check-ins on team building with Mary Hurlie (July 14): Dylan McGarthwaite**

And just like that the inaugural Middlebury School of the Environment has crossed the halfway point! Amid big things to come, we jumped into week 4 with a delightful visit from Mary Hurlie to discuss our final projects thus far. After spending just one week working together on our projects, each of the three different teams were able to craft two stories based on the Vermont Global Climate Change Assessment (VGCCA). We looked at what the VGCCA defined as plausible outcomes that could surface through continued climate change. We divided the outcomes into two groups, certainties and uncertainties. The certainties are the scenarios that VGCCA defined as “very high” or what they expect to occur. The uncertainties were the consequences in which the results are less definite yet still conceivable. Grounded on the VGCCA outcomes, we focused on what systems of Middlebury College would be the most vulnerable to climate change in 2035.

Earlier in the semester we had a workshop with Mary that dealt with effectively working and communicating in teams. During her recent visit, Mary was interested in seeing how well our individual teams were “gelling” and managing our tasks. Each team was able to meet with Mary and discuss the things that were going well and the little things that we could work on. Our meeting fostered a comfortable environment in which we were able to receive constructive feedback. Additionally, we were able to discuss a few strategies in the event that future challenges develop. It is crunch time here at the School of the Environment and we are all excited to see how the final weeks challenge the skills that we have acquired throughout the semester.

**Film screening: Land of Oil and Water, with co-director Neil McArthur (July 16): Kaitlin (Finky) Fink**

A delicate spider web, presented against a background of haunting flute music, serves as both the opening and closing shot of the 2009 documentary “Land of Oil and Water,” and appropriately reflects the tangled and interconnected narratives that the film explores. The School of the Environment students – along with other Middlebury College English-speakers and members of the community – gathered
Wednesday night for a public screening of this piece, which explores the ways in which First Nation peoples in Alberta and Saskatchewan are being affected by the development of the Alberta Tar Sands. We were extremely fortunate to be joined by co-director Neil McArthur, who flew in from Winnipeg, Canada for this event, and engaged in a lively question-and-answer session with the audience following the movie.

This film was the third in a series of four documentaries that supplement the curriculum of the Environmentalism and the Poor elective; this was, however, the first (and only) opportunity that we had to directly connect and interact with one of these movies’ directors. The documentaries have each been chosen to reflect the theme of the week’s classes, and “Land of Oil and Water” was no exception: we have been considering historical trends of dispossession and the privatization of land, and hearing the firsthand responses of aboriginal Canadians to a modern-day iteration of this trend was extremely powerful in connecting our readings and discussions to a highly-contentious current issue.

The discussion that ensued as McArthur answered questions from members of the audience was energetic, thoughtful, and, at times, deeply provocative. It was invaluable to have the film’s director there with us as we grappled with questions of economics, politics, health, corruption, and the future not only of Alberta, but of Canadian and American societies as a whole. The students in the Environmentalism and the Poor elective were lucky enough to have an additional hour to spend with McArthur the next morning during class, where we were able to ask more detailed questions about the filmmaking process and the implications of this film and others like it.

Ultimately, although “Land of Oil and Water” was presented as part of our elective course, it ties in with broader themes that we have been exploring across all three courses: specifically, the idea of understanding through a diverse set of narratives. This documentary, McArthur freely admits, is not meant to be a comprehensive look at the issue of the Alberta Tar Sands development; rather, it is meant to provide one key and often overlooked narrative – that of the First Nation people – to the discussion. In this, the film is highly successful, and Wednesday’s screening and discussion was thus invaluable in deepening our sense of how varying perspectives combine to frame any given situation. Thanks to Neil McArthur for joining us and allowing us to have this experience!

*Conversation with Jack Byrne, currently with the Middlebury College Office of Sustainability Integration* (July 17): Eliot Neal

Middlebury College Director of Sustainability Jack Byrne is an easy choice for a School of the Environment practitioner. He has incredible experience in transforming his passion for the environment into a career, and is a great social entrepreneur. We all have much to learn from him. One of the biggest takeaways from Jack’s talk were three principles he has followed when pursuing job opportunities. They are:

1. Should make a difference in the world
2. Should be fun

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1. Should make a difference in the world
2. Should be fun
3. Should make enough money to do 1 & 2

In his work for 4 different nonprofits, he has certainly managed to do these. Jack also shared with us some of the skills that has helped him be successful, such as networking, communication, and simple serendipity.

Jack’s talk provided a lot of insight into what it might be like to work in a wide variety of job sectors – federal/state agencies, NGOs, foundations, private businesses. By telling us what he thought he did right, and what he would have done differently, Jack is a great example of the perseverance and determination it takes to succeed in an environmentally focused career.

_Conversation with Gus Speth, currently with the Vermont Law School_ (July 21): Isaac Baker

On Monday, July 21, 2014, students from the School of the Environment had the opportunity to sit down with Gus Speth, one of the co-founders of the National Resources Defense Council. During the discussion, Mr. Speth shared a great deal of advice, stemming from many decades working to protect the environment. Between his work to establish a public interest law firm litigating on environmental issues and his present engagement with imagining a new economy based on local values, justice, and community, Mr. Speth was an inspiration.

The practitioner talk had clear value for us as members of the School of the Environment. While Mr. Speth shared a lot of the content that filled his days and professional life, he also shared some insight into how he was able to make change on a personal level. Through balancing family life with career aspirations, staying true to his roots, and not being afraid to push the envelope, Mr. Speth demonstrated some of the circumstances that got him started in his career and the habits and strategies he used throughout.

_Lecture on A Washington Environmental Insider Goes Radical, by Gus Speth_ (July 21): Dana Kluchinski

The School of the Environment was fortunate to have Gus Speth, founder of the NRDC speak with us on Tuesday night. He discussed his opinions on the changing climate movement; both in the past, present, and future. He thinks that it is a failure today. We focus on the exponential growth of the economy while realistically that is an unsustainable practice.

Today he thinks we have lost communication with the people by using too much jargon, and confining ourselves to the current government system. We are losing leeway by staying within the bounds of government. The change we see while working within the current system is too slow.

He also emphasized the need to expand this movement beyond just environmentalists, because we cannot take on this burden alone. He believes we need a new economy, new politics, and a new environmentalism.

This was an important contribution to the school because we have the capacity to make these changes, and this is the movement we are entering both now, and
after college in our careers. His wisdom of over 50 years in the environmental movement can help us to expand our outlook on the global climate movement. We are the ones that need to go on to make change and find the rebirth of activism.

_Conversation with Alden Woodrow, Google X (July 22): Alex Cort_

Alden Woodrow is the Business Team Lead at Makani, a company looking at new ways of harnessing wind technology. He joined us as a Practitioner in Residence and took a different approach than many before him. He used a “Buzzfeed” style PowerPoint presentation to convey a list of things he had learned thus far in his career. Unlike the other professionals we have spent time with this summer, Alden works with a for-profit company. His position is interesting because even though he works for a start-up, Google purchased his company. It was exciting and inspiring to see the passion he has for the Makani project and renewable energy.

This session contributes directly the School of the Environment curriculum because it enables us, the students, to have a broad view of the possible environmentally related career paths one can pursue. Moreover, as an interdisciplinary scholar it is important to understand a variety of different perspectives, of which Alden brought a new one to the table.

_Panel discussion: Careers in the Environment (July 22): Marjeela Basij-Rasikh_

All the students at SoE is at a stage in life that pretty soon they have to think about work and to identify in what kind of work environment they find themselves to be most effective. I found the interview with the career panel from DC very useful. It shed light into the different work possibilities as they talked about different ways (such as using your existing network as an starting point) to tap into different job opportunities. The panel members were very clear about their message, which was no matter what you do and where you work, you will make a difference in the world. They thought that they are making difference in their own ways through the work they are doing.

It was very inspiring to see them hopeful and optimistic, and they seemed very passionate about their job. At SoE we have been talking about what it means to be an effective leader, and one of the things we talked about that leadership does not necessarily mean always leading, or controlling, the team. Great leadership is about influencing and helping the team members to move forward towards the common goal. Similarly, as we talked about it in the class, the panel members did mention that leadership is also about being active members of the team and giving the opportunity for all members in the team to express themselves and practice their leadership role. The panel members were also persuasive since they made it clear that the first job that we will be getting does not necessarily mean it will determine what we will be doing for the rest of our lives. It was great to hear them saying that they learn something unique from every job they have taken, every job has added to their skills and experience that have helped them to become great leaders, and that they could move forward and do another job whenever they felt to leverage their
skills and experience. Just like what we have been learning at SoE in the past six weeks, the panels members agreed that no matter where you work the following skills are important to have in order to be most effective at you job and during working as a team, and they are: being excellent in writing, persuasive communicator, integrating sustainability in your field of work, telling your narratives compellingly (and using other narrative to inspire people to take action), and using GIS and excel is also useful. All of these skills have been the focus of SoE, which has helped us students to become effective leaders and active team members.

Open mic night (July 23): Joseph Interligi

The student body and our professors assembled on a local restaurant called 51 Main for an open mic night. This was one of our only extracurricular activities that was set up for a social platform. Every member of the School of the Environment performed some type of piece even though it was not required of them. We held the stage from 8pm to 11pm showing Middlebury how wonderful the School of the Environment really is.

This event was a wonderful bonding experience for the social camaraderie of the school. With an open stage for free expression the 51 Main, open mic night showed that our classmates had many more talents than just being able to complete school work. After five weeks of rigorous school work this opportunity was a welcomed moment of decompression. A night full of laughing and relaxation made the demand of our future week six seem well worth it.

Lecture/workshop on The Power of Empathy by Helen Riess (July 24): Kate Eiseman

After spending five weeks developing a set of tools for understanding systems and places and looking forward to Practicum pitches in the upcoming (final) week, it is easy to understand the relevance of Dr. Helen Riess’ message. Riess, Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, spoke to the importance of empathy in the environmental movement, specifically the role of empathy in inciting others to act. Unlike sympathy (understood as experiencing the same feeling as another), empathy enables us to imagine that we are that other person (animal, vegetable, mineral), to feel with that person (animal, vegetable, mineral), and, ultimately, concludes with movement towards actions. This final arm, Riess explained, is often referred to as compassion.

Our afternoon with Riess will not only be helpful as we prepare to make recommendations on improving College resilience in the face of climate change. On a personal level, Riess’ lecture reaffirmed the deep connection between humans and the more-than-human world and offered hope for our capacity to move forward.

Here is what I will take away --

1. Critical reasoning depends on the creativity of our right brain, which depends on access to expansive and beautiful places.

2. Contrary to our notion of competition or the ‘survival of the fittest,’ we, humans, are wired for mutual aid. We are wired to feel each other’s pain and to come together in communities.
In my mind, Dr. Helen Riess validated our connection to the environment and our connections to one another.