

# The Merry Leaflet

Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center of Goshen College | P.O. Box 263, Wolf Lake, IN 46796 | 260.799.5869 | merrylea@goshen.edu | goshen.edu/merrylea

## Sustainability students embrace complexity

BY **Jennifer Schrock**

It's been nearly two months since the seventh cohort of undergraduates completed Merry Lea's Sustainability Leadership Semester (SLS). Between mid-August and mid-December, they shared classes, meals, field trips, hikes, social activities and a weeklong canoeing adventure.

The SLS is designed for students who want to help create a resilient future for their communities despite our rapidly changing planet. Experiential learning, immersion in the natural world, interdisciplinary perspectives and personal leadership development are hallmarks of the semester. It is required for students in Goshen College's sustainability studies major. It is also open to students from any discipline who want to earn a minor in sustainability, and to professionals who can take it for certificate. This year's cohort included students pursuing sustainability studies, sustainability management, environmental science, American Sign Language and English.

I attended the presentations the SLSers gave on their final projects in December. More recently, I tracked down three of the students to find out what they took with them when they left. It was apparent that meaningful relationships with other students and faculty had been important to them. They also appreciated educational experiences that recognize the whole person. The SLS integrates academics with activities such as nature hikes, preserving food and periods of silence.

I expected these responses. The common thread that surprised me more was their cheerful appreciation for complexity.

The students I listened to had no illusions that moving a society in more sustainable directions would be simple, but this was coupled with a surprising good humor about it. They assumed there were ways they could effect change. It might even be fun! This is refreshing in an era increasingly prone to gloom and black-and-white thinking.

Petra Showalter, Goshen, Ind., described a deepening desire to understand the systems we all live in and how to responsibly participate in them.

"It's not always intuitive what sustainability looks like in your own context," she said. This point was brought home to her



**Elena Meyer Reimer and Petra Showalter**, students in last fall's Sustainability Leadership Semester, prepare to test the water quality at Merry Lea for their Water Resources course.  
*Photo by Petra Showalter.*

on a field trip to Borden Waste-Away, a recycling facility in Elkhart, Ind. The tour guide told the class that while there were viable ways for a for-profit company to recycle cardboard, aluminum and plastic bottles, recycling glass was an expensive burden to the company. The abundance of sand in the Michiana region made it difficult to find buyers for glass, and it had to be shipped to Chicago.

Elena Meyer-Reimer, Goshen, Ind., reflected on the scale at which modern societies operate limits and the ways this limits

*Sustainability, continued on page 4*



**FROM THE INTERIM DIRECTOR'S DESK  
DR. DAVE OSTERGREN**

## Small things, great love

Greetings from The Commonwealth of the Bahamas,

My salutation may seem odd for someone who is responsible for educational activities in one part of Indiana, but I still direct the Master of Arts in Environmental Education program as well as serving as interim director. For 21 days, the master's students and I learn about a subtropical ecosystem and then work with six elementary schools to get kids outside and connect them to their environment.

Every year, (this is our fourth) I am amazed by how much the graduate students absorb. We learn how interconnected ecosystems are, how education is a process for teacher and student alike and how the joy of discovery in nature is a universal feeling. This is clearly part of Merry Lea's three-part mission—connecting people to nature through environmental education. The time on Andros Island is a powerful experience that makes our master's students better educators and ripples throughout their careers.

I write at dawn, as a flock of ibises fly by across still waters with hues of pink, white and blue reflected from a waking sky. Every morning, about 30 individuals cruise to the shore to wade in the mangrove flats where they sift through the silt for tasty tidbits. In the evening, they return to their mangrove apartment for a calm night, tucked away from whatever ibises need to avoid. Great Blue Herons, Little Blue Herons, Green Herons, Snowy Egrets, and Osprey are common neighbors.

We are a mile from the ocean on what is called Fresh Creek. It's a brackish stretch of water, 300 yards wide, that flows east into the ocean when the tide goes out and west toward the inland fresh-water sources and an expansive lake when the tide comes in. We spend hours exploring these waters, from ankle-deep to 15 feet. Vegetation grows in sandy flats, providing food for the sea turtles we are rarely lucky enough to see. Two thirds of the edible fish here start in the mangroves. Mangroves nurse hundreds of fish species, producing uncountable fry that power a food chain right up to the dolphins who occasionally break the surface of the ocean. Nutrients are trapped by filter feeders that come in fantastic forms from upside down jellyfish to spotted rays to unusual bottom-feeding sharks, two to seven feet long. In my head, I know it's a bottom feeder, but floating above a creature longer than I am still strikes a nerve.

We hike through unfamiliar terrain where the graduate students use their naturalist skills to learn the species and decipher the ecosystems. We stop at a blue hole, a vastly deep, round lake 100 yards across, with 40 feet of fresh water sitting atop saltwater that connects to the ocean through caves. These are remarkable features of Andros Island.

A huge reason we are here is to inspire curiosity. The elementary students we teach drive by miles of mangroves every day but rarely get the chance to walk on the sharp limestone, dig in the mud or pick up a bug or jellyfish. We ask, "What's going on? What's a nursery? How do filters work and why is it so beautiful?" We wander to the beach so they can run free, make sandcastles and appreciate the ocean that produces

### ABOUT MERRY LEA

Merry Lea was created with the assistance of The Nature Conservancy and through the generosity of Lee A. and Mary Jane Rieth. It is operated by Goshen College. The center provides a comprehensive program of environmental education and recreation.

*The Merry Leaflet*, published in spring, summer, fall and winter, provides news about programs and developments at Merry Lea. Jennifer Halteman Schrock is its editor and the author of articles without bylines. See the news tab at [goshen.edu/merrylea](http://goshen.edu/merrylea) for more news.

### TEAM MEMBERS

**Chad Agler**, *Building Manager and Grounds Assistant*

**Kaeli Evans**, *Farm Manager*

**Elena Fischer**, *Environmental Educator*

**Krista Freel**, *Environmental Educator*

**Kerry Goodrich**, *Property Supervisor*

**Carol Good-Elliott**,  
*Environmental Educator*

**Tom Hartzell**, *Coordinator of Undergraduate Programs*

**Bill Minter**, *Director of Land Management*

**John Mischler**, *Director of Agroecology*

**Ruth Mischler**, *Asst. Professor, SEED*

**Dave Ostergren**, *Interim Executive Director & Director of the MAEE*

**Joel Pontius**, *Director of Sustainability Leadership Semester*

**Jonathon Schramm**,  
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*Small things, continued on page 3*

food, livelihoods and vast aquamarine horizons. I hear morning reflections from students at breakfast on the unusual ecosystems and the wonderful people we meet.

Here, our graduate students discover that they are educators. They gain much more than any of the Bahamian children they work with. They learn that they can go into a new ecosystem with new audiences and inspire curiosity.

In May, Merry Lea and Goshen College will send out another cohort who will seek to connect people to nature. The hopes we have for them made me want to discuss Merry Lea's role in changing society's trajectory on climate change somewhere in this letter. But the blue skies reminded me that the vast majority of us do not make great changes on great issues. Rather, as Mother Theresa once said, "We do small things with great love."

Our students and all the Merry Lea team connect people to nature through small moments motivated by great love. I thank them all. As I finish this note, I can say that all is well. A Royal Tern hovers near me and then plunges to spear small fish in the shallows. A miraculous sight to behold. I rest in reflection. 🌿



Interim Director **Dave Ostergren** at Rainbow Blue Hole, a unique geological feature on Andros Island, The Bahamas.



## Editor's Note

### Dear readers:

This is my last *Merry Leaflet*. I have enjoyed editing our newsletter over the past 12 years. It has given me a window into the amazing work of our team and students that I wouldn't have had otherwise. I hope you can say the same.

Merry Lea's communications will change hands shortly. I will continue at Merry Lea in my other half time role as leader of Mennonite Creation Care Network, but combine it with a role related to Goshen College's Study Service Term.

This is a good time in my life to do a new thing. I believe it is also a time when Merry Lea will benefit from the energy and possibilities that team changes bring.

—Jennifer Schrock,  
*outgoing communications manager*

## Survey Request

Hannah Bennett, one of our master's students, is developing a master plan for interpretive signage on Merry Lea's property. If you are willing to share your opinion on trail signage, please visit her survey at:

<https://tinyurl.com/thusgz4>

## Let us know your wishes

We do not have a good way of knowing when paper copies of the *Merry Leaflet* are no longer desired. Please tell us if we should stop mailing them to you. Email [merrylea@goshen.edu](mailto:merrylea@goshen.edu) with unsubscribe in the heading. In the body, include your address as it appears on the mailing label. Or call **260-799-5869**. This saves trees, saves us money and simplifies your life.

how sustainably things can be done. Within one week, the SLSers observed Merry Lea team members butchering a chicken in preparation for an educational program, helped butcher a deer, visited a small meat packing plant on a farm and toured a larger operation. Elena found the contrast between one chicken and a conveyor belt full of chickens jarring. She saw how much easier it was to treat one animal with respect than it was hundreds.

Elena was also struck by the amount of background work any given action can require.

“Even when we agree on issues like climate change, that’s not enough,” she remarked. She recalled a meeting with aides from Senator Mike Braun’s office. The SLSers were there to discuss a bi-partisan climate caucus that the senator had introduced in October. While she found hope in the caucus’ consensus that climate change must be addressed, it was also clear that there was no agreement on strategies for doing so. Far more work would be needed before any action could happen.

To further complicate matters, students found examples of visionary thinking in unexpected places. On another field trip to a gravel pit, Petra recalls her surprise when the owner described his vision for restoring the land once extraction was completed.

“I thought I would have a lot of critiques of the operation, but I actually saw he was taking responsibility for the land,” she said.

Throughout the semester, students worked with local businesses or non-profits on projects related to that organization’s needs. These hands-on experiences contributed to the sense of realism students displayed. A project as straightforward and hope-filled as creating a .3-mile nature trail still requires a host of complex decisions. Christian Gehman and Petra Showalter worked with the Loon Lisle Property Association to draw up plans that would



Pizza, Salvador Dali-style, is one of many meals students in the Sustainability Leadership Semester created and shared together. These were made in the wood-fired oven at the Farmstead Site.

allow the property owners to access the Noble County lakefront they were preserving.

How wide should the trail be? Is recycled rubber or gravel preferable? What seed mix is most appropriate for the area reserved for a native prairie planting? Why is it important that the border be curved? What maintenance will be required and how much is all this going to cost? They needed to answer each of these questions in order to present their proposal.

Levi Ebersole worked with the Elkhart County Food Council, an organization seeking to improve food quality and security for the community. Assisting an all-volunteer organization with limited means gave him a chance to tackle questions more often reserved for CEOs. He spent a lot of time researching organizational structures that might strengthen the food council and proposed social media strategies that could raise its profile.

Elena worked with Leo’s Restaurant in Elkhart. Inspired by a creation care

emphasis at his church, the owner was interested in greening his operation. Elena discovered resources like the Green Restaurant Association and a food waste reduction tool. Even though just one site was involved and the owner was driving the desire for change, there were still barriers to negotiate. Switching light fixtures and taps was the easy part. Working with food regulations and customer choices required compromises.

Despite having survived a semester designed to temper rosy idealism, the SLS students I spoke with seemed none the worse for wear. Luke Vance is an example of someone who seems to have come out of the SLS with more enthusiasm than he brought into it.

He describes backpacking trips in his home state of Idaho and the effects of capitalism on the environment with equal fervor and animated hand gestures. His dream for the future? One that will be partially realized this summer through

an internship with the Sierra Club Idaho. It's perfect for an aspiring writer: helping people tell stories about nature.

"I believe storytelling is one of the most powerful tools we have," he says.

The students I interviewed had foraged for mushrooms and seen bald eagles. They'd begun a day's paddling by dipping their fingers into the Elkhart River and savoring the quality of light. They'd crafted fresh vegetables from the Merry Lea Sustainable Farm into fun meals. Then, they'd cleaned up the dishes together. Whatever failures they'd witnessed, whatever the disillusionment they may have suffered, it was masked by the fact that they'd had a roaring good time. May we all end our semesters—and our lives—on that note. 



A surprise encounter with a praying mantis provides a break from the hard work of building a sustainable future.



## Lawyer brings new lens to policy course

A new face joined the SLS faculty this fall. Laura Pontius, an immigration lawyer, brought a fresh perspective to the Environmental Policy and Politics

course. What does immigration law have to do with sustainability? Increased global migration caused by climate change is one connecting point.

"We are seeing a major increase to climate migrants and refugees in recent years, with large amounts of movement coming from around the equator," Laura says.

The relevance of Laura's profession to sustainability is one of many examples of the interdisciplinary nature of environmental problems and the diverse perspectives needed to address them. Students said they enjoyed watching Laura learn alongside them as they dove into environmental policy together. They also appreciated the chance to watch her as she served on a panel on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals at Purdue University, Fort Wayne.

Laura and the students looked at how policy is formed at the international, national, state and local levels. At the international level, the group studied the effect climate change has on global migration patterns and the ways policymakers are responding.

At the national level, environmentally prudent legislation may be written but doesn't have opportunity to make significant impact because it doesn't survive frequent changes in administrations. This idea came up repeatedly as the class reviewed the history of the environmental movement since the 1960s.

A visit with Janet McCabe underscored the point. She served the Environmental Protection Agency as acting assistant administrator for the Office of Air and Radiation during the Obama era and co-authored sweeping revisions to the Clean Air Act, including the Mercury and Air Toxics Standards and the Clean Power Plan and Ozone Standards that were later overturned by the Trump Administration.

Laura challenged the class with an assignment to write a policy brief. This required students to understand an issue of their choice well enough to describe it concisely, present an array of policy responses and then recommend the best option.

"I wanted them to lean into an issue they really cared about, so I assigned the format, leaving the topic open" Laura explained. Interests ranged from legislation related to bike paths to coal mining regulations.

The most inspiring aspect of the course was the exposure it provided to policy successes at the local level. The week before the students met with the former EPA official, Janet McCabe, they visited a councilwoman to discuss the City of Goshen's pledge to become carbon neutral. Some of the resources behind the city's efforts came from Indiana University's Environmental Resilience Institute. Who directs this visionary institute that supports similar efforts statewide? Janet McCabe.

It may seem like all the environmental news is bad news, but students had the opportunity to see that local actors and institutions are making significant progress. 

## Nature Preschool Excursions

# From dinosaurs to dead deer

What happens when children's interests drive education? Merry Lea's Nature Preschool could offer plenty of examples. In one case, it all began with dinosaurs.

Dinosaurs fascinate many preschoolers. In some settings, this would be considered a distraction, but under the direction of Reggio-trained\* teachers from the Cole Center Family YMCA in Kendallville, it became a jumping-off point for many kinds of learning. In their indoor classroom at Central Noble Primary School in Wolf Lake, the class compared the sizes of different dinosaurs and discussed measurements. They looked at skeletons and became interested in bones.

Merry Lea's Carol Good-Elliott, who teaches the outdoor portion of the preschool, picked up on these interests. Since birds evolved from dinosaurs and retain similar features, she showed the children a stuffed mount of a cooper's hawk. They looked at the bird's talons and other adaptations and made connections to dinosaurs.

Carol provided a chicken skeleton for the children to assemble and hid turkey bones in the outdoor classroom for children to find. She even procured a road-killed rabbit so that the group could observe how bodies change after death, returning to the earth but leaving some parts behind for a longer period of time.

A scavenger got the rabbit before the children ever saw it, but nature provided an alternative. On an excursion day while walking home from the Merry Lea Sustainable Farm, the preschoolers came upon a dead deer.

"The other teachers thought I knew it was there. I was completely surprised!" Carol remarked.

The children were fascinated and asked many questions. Since they'd just been playing with goats at the farm, they could make comparisons between the two species of hoofed ruminants. They pointed out how similar the animals' legs were.

"Can we take it back to our classroom?" the children wondered. Most adults might have responded, "It's yucky! Don't touch!" Carol took another approach.

"I'm not going to carry it back to the classroom," she countered.

"It stinks!"

"What do you think would happen if we did take it back to our classroom?"

"If we leave it here, something might take it away."

"That would be interesting too. What would that tell us about animals that are here that we don't get to see?"

The next week on another walk, the group found the dead deer again. This time, it was in more manageable pieces and the children did carry some of it back to the classroom. There, they discussed what they could do with the remains.

"We could use the bones to build a monster truck."

"We could try connecting them back together so we could see how they work."

"We could build a special house for them, like a museum."

"We could bury them," volunteered a child who had been to a funeral.

Parents may struggle to know how to talk about death with young children, but in the wild, it is evident everywhere: in fallen trees, decomposing leaf litter and the occasional animal carcass.

Leaders did not set out to teach about decomposition. There were no fill-in-the-blank worksheets on the names of bones or lectures explaining what death is. Instead, the children took the initiative to explore these things in their own way, creating memories that may remain with them all of their lives. 

\* The Reggio approach is an educational philosophy emphasizing self-directed, experiential learning at the preschool and primary level.



Children in Merry Lea's Nature Preschool encountered a dead deer on a walk. It not only provided food for decomposers; it also provided much food for thought.

## The Merry Lea Team:

# What are you working on right now?



### Here's how a few of our team members answered that question:

#### **Krista Freel**

*Environmental educator*

I am preparing to leave for Chattanooga for a teacher workshop on outdoor education and nature schools. I love continually gaining new insights into the field of environmental education so we can provide the highest quality program for our own nature preschool. We also hope to establish ourselves as a regional resource for other groups that may be interested in starting their own program.

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#### **Tom Hartzell**

*Coordinator for residential programs*

I am representing the Merry Lea Team on the hiring committee for our next executive director. This morning, I participated in interviews with candidates, and I am very encouraged by our pool! I am also putting together the 7th Annual Sustainability Summit. This weekend conference and retreat for regional undergraduate students seeks to educate, equip and unite sustainability leaders on college campuses.

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#### **Ruth Mischler**

*SEED faculty with the Merry Lea Sustainable Farm*

Winter months are a welcomed season for the Farm Team. We use this time to plan for the next growing season. You'll find us in the Oshtemo office

space analyzing our spreadsheets, writing a yearly report, creating garden maps, pouring over seed catalogs, ordering supplies and having lots of meetings over warm cups of tea. We are setting plans in motion for the Agroecology Summer Intensive.

If you don't find us inside, you might walk over to the Hess Barn where we are feeding hay, trimming hooves and caring for our pregnant dairy goats and last year's goat kids. If you still haven't found us, you'll want to hike out to our woody perennial polyculture where we are caring for our diverse perennial plantings.

And if you still haven't found us it's possible that we are off site. Winter is the time of year that we attend conferences, visit with other local farmers and grow ourselves professionally, or we are out supporting our community in food councils and teaching classes on Goshen College's campus.

Even with snow, cold temperatures, and less visible activity in the winter, we welcome a visit out to Merry Lea's farm! We'll happily share a cup of tea and ask you how your garden plans are coming along.

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#### **Joel Pontius**

*Director of the Sustainability Leadership Semester*

Writing for publication is an important part of my work. Currently, I am co-authoring an article on Mary Oliver's poetry with my eight-year-old daughter, Emmy. I discovered Mary Oliver just before she was born, and she has an unusual affinity for this author.

Also, I just got a glimpse of the cover of a forthcoming book I co-edited, *Place-based Learning for the Plate: Hunting, Foraging and Fishing for Food*.

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#### **Eric Shaffer**

*Recruiter for the SEED department*

I continue to grow my connections with local high schools. This week, I'll travel to Marion High School and assist with the Science Olympiad at Goshen College, a competitive tournament for teams of high school students. These connections make Merry Lea more visible in the Michiana area and inform high school students about the opportunities Goshen has to offer in sustainability.

I am also assisting Bill Minter with land management at Merry Lea. Currently we are working to control invasive species—Prickly Ash and Amur Honeysuckle—in Wilmer Woods. This gives me a much-needed break from a computer screen and allows me to use my degree in forestry to help beautify Merry Lea. It's a win-win in my book.

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#### **Maria Tice**

*Volunteer coordinator & administrative assistant*

I've been thinking about our work culture at Merry Lea and how to describe it to the Merry Lea board. I'm also coordinating an informal discussion on this topic with coworkers. 🌱



## Merry Lea

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## Events

Learn more at: [goshen.edu/merrylea](http://goshen.edu/merrylea)

*These events all take place at Merry Lea.*

Farmstead Barn address: **2152 S 425 W, Albion, Ind.** | Learning Center Building: **2388 S 500 W, Albion, Ind.**

### Family Hike Series — March

**WHERE:** Learning Center Building

**WHEN:** Saturday, March 7, 10 a.m. – 12 p.m.

Discover Merry Lea's wetlands with a trail guide. All ages welcome. Free, but register online by March 5.

### Reflection on Nature Women's Walk

**WHERE:** Farmstead Barn Site

**WHEN:** Saturday, March 21, 8:30 a.m.–11 p.m.

Join other women for reflection in nature. Rediscover the restorative power of natural spaces and of women in community. \$10/person; register by Friday, March 20.

### Volunteer Teacher Training

**WHERE:** Learning Center Building,  
Farmstead Barn Site

**WHEN:** Monday, March 23, 8 a.m. to 12 p.m.

Assist Merry Lea's environmental educators with school programs. Email [mariaact@goshen.edu](mailto:mariaact@goshen.edu) for details.

### Spring Break Day Camp

**WHERE:** Learning Center Building,  
Farmstead Barn Site

**WHEN:**

Monday, April 6, 9 a.m. – Thursday, April 9, 4 p.m.

Time outdoors and nature activities for kindergarten through 5th graders. \$30 per child. Online registration is open; don't delay.

### Family Hike Series — April

**WHERE:** Farmstead Barn Site

**WHEN:** Thursday, April 9, 10 a.m.–12 p.m.

Discover Merry Lea's wetlands with a trail guide. All ages welcome. Free, but register online by April 7.

### Nature Fest

**WHERE:** Farmstead Barn Site

**WHEN:** Friday, May 15, 7 p.m. –  
Saturday, May 16, 1:30 p.m.

This annual event for all ages includes, hikes, crafts and the option of an overnight campout. Details coming soon.