

Sustainability in Nebraska

By **JAY LEIGHTER, Ph.D.** and **KATIE TORPY**

THE resources Nebraska has are unique in their abundance, quality and combination. What values do we place on their availability for use and protection?

Answering this question is one purpose of the Conversations Conference on Nebraska Environment and Sustainability (CCNES). Convened by the Joslyn Institute for Sustainable Communities, the CCNES is a partnership among institutions of higher learning across Nebraska. Beginning last fall

at Creighton University and continuing this spring and summer at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Central Community College (Grand Island) and Western Nebraska Community College (Scottsbluff), the CCNES provides a unique forum for citizens of Nebraska to come together and talk about five critical resources in the state: land, food, water, energy and materials.

One point of agreement expressed by many of the participants from the Creighton University conference was a desire to have the themes and outcomes

of their conversations serve as a resource for the participants in the conferences to follow. As facilitator, I had the opportunity to move about the conference, listen to the ideas and concerns expressed by the participants and attempt to synthesize the major themes of the conversations. Here are three.

First, the participants experienced and addressed the complexity of issues surrounding these resources. One example of this occurred in a conversation on the resource of land. The participants in this conversation raised a

question about whether or not public policy in the region contributes to suburban sprawl. The question led to a debate about sanitary and improvement districts (SIDs) and their merits and limitations. The participants in the conversation were exposed to a variety of positions, points of disagreement were clarified, defended, qualified or refined, and each participant left with a richer understanding of the policy. Throughout the day, similar conversations occurred on the feasibility of local food

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production and distribution, the policies and influences of public power, the merits and concerns of the pipeline, sources of ground water pollution and the economics of using sustainable building materials.

Events like CCNES are one way to increase the likelihood that conversations will lead to increased understanding, education, inclusion and commitment.

Second, conversations on the five resources tended to include some attention to the topics of education and inclusion. Participants time and again returned to the notion that more people in Nebraska need an opportunity to learn about what challenges face the state, what resources are available for use and which ones need protection.

Finally, one source of concern was the tension between individual actions and the notion of a communal good. One question logged in a conversation on food policy, one that characterizes the sentiments expressed on all of the resources, put it this way: whose responsibility is it to make changes? Others pondered: how do we raise the level of commitment in individual citizens for making changes? One interesting outcome found in our post-conference communication with the participants at Creighton was that many of them expressed an increase in their own personal commitment to pushing for action toward a more sustainable future in the state of Nebraska and making personal changes in their own lives to protect the resources in the state. This is often the case in events like the CCNES. Participants in high-quality conversation learn about issues, learn about themselves and develop a desire to change their own behaviors.

Conversations such as these will not always lead to increased understanding, education, inclusion and commitment, but the CCNES, and events like it, are one way to increase their likelihood. The conversations of the CCNES, brief though they were, demonstrate what can occur when citizens come together for the purpose of developing a better understanding of issues facing them.

Southeastern Nebraskans have the next opportunity to participate in the CCNES on Feb. 11, 2011, at University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The

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Grand Island and Scottsbluff programs are scheduled on May 26, 2011, and Aug. 19, 2011, respectively. Registrations for all three conferences are currently being accepted online. Visit www.nslw.org/conversations.html for additional information.

Jay Leighter, Ph.D., joined the Department of Communication Studies at Creighton University in 2006 where he teaches courses in cross-cultural communication, small group communication, interpersonal communication and public speaking. As an ethnographer of communication, he studies local public and political discourse and tries to understand how culture and communication intersect and influence the settings and scenes in which such communication takes place. A consultant with the Joslyn Institute for Sustainable Communities since 2008, Leighter moderated the Omaha CCNES event and will do so again in Scottsbluff, Neb., for the August 2011 program.

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