

UC Berkeley's Beahrs program an oasis for war-weary global environmentalists

A striking number of international participants in a UC Berkeley environmental management course face daunting challenges to promote sustainable development in their countries — particularly in wake of war, military conflicts and their aftermath.

They were among 35 environmental professionals in the 4th annual Beahrs Environmental Leadership Program (ELP) in Sustainable Environmental management held this summer.

"Our country is in a mess," explains Dinesh Paudel, forestry development coordinator for the Nepal Swiss Community Forestry Project in Kathmandu, Nepal. With 70% of the Nepalese countryside under the control of Maoist guerillas, tourism has collapsed and the small country's once-hopeful community forestry initiatives are threatened. "The mismanagement of environmental resources has become a root cause for the conflict," Paudel says.

Paudel and colleagues from 19 countries were convened by the Center for Sustainable Resource Development in UC Berkeley's College of Natural Resources. Together with an interdisciplinary team of UC Berkeley faculty, researchers and local community activists, they tackled complex issues from urban environmental justice to sustainable livelihoods. The intensive 3-week ELP summer course offers midcareer professionals, mainly from developing countries, a full schedule of workshops, lectures and field trips, including training on conflict management and strengthening leadership skills.

"It takes a few days for participants to shed their anxieties and work-related stress, but eventually they let down their guards, stimulate their minds and creativity, and make friends across borders, religions and disciplines," says Robin Marsh, ELP co-director. "It's an empowering experience."

As an ELP alumnus, Paudel plans to submit a proposal to the ELP Small Grant Initiative, in collaboration with the Haas School of Business at UC Berkeley. "I want to get their advice and help to set up a business model in which valuable forest products are used sustainably and marketed effectively," he says, "so people can get real money, not peanuts."

Likewise, ELP participant Sayed Hashmat, a top Afghani irrigation engineer, says that years of mismanagement, neglect and outright destruction by the Taliban (and previously the Mujahideen) have left Afghanistan's agricultural irrigation systems in a shambles. Hashmat discussed irrigation and the environmental impacts of dam construction with UC Berkeley entomology professor Vincent Resh and his doctoral students during a full-day ELP workshop



Participants in the 2004 Beahrs Environmental Leadership Program included, left to right, UC Berkeley entomologist Vincent Resh and Sayed Hashmat, an Afghani irrigation engineer; Dinesh Paudel, Nepalese community forestry coordinator; and Aventino Kasangaki, Ugandan wildlife ecologist, and Anyaa Vohiri, Liberian environmental lawyer.

at the UC Botanical Garden." I hope we can return to peace. If we have security, we can have all kinds of restoration projects," Hashmat says.

Established in 2000 with funding from UC Berkeley alumni Richard and Carolyn Beahrs, the program strives to foster ongoing networks and knowledge exchanges. The course has launched numerous projects between UC Berkeley, Bay Area environmental leaders and ELP alumni, including in South Africa, Cameroon, Indonesia, Russia, Mexico and Vietnam.

Resh has taught in the program since its inception and traveled to the Republic of Georgia this year to provide technical assistance on water-quality monitoring, in collaboration with an ELP graduate. "It's amazing how the [ELP participants] work under these unbelievable conditions and are still getting meaningful work done," Resh says.

The connections that participants make may be most valuable to them in the long run, Resh adds. "I think they benefit from the program less from us than from each other."

ELP participant Anyaa Vohiri, for example, works for Fauna and Flora International as manager of their Liberia Forest Re-assessment Project. A native Liberian, Vohiri was educated and spent most of her adult life in the United States. "Logging was used to fuel 14 years of civil war in Liberia," says Vohiri. Her efforts to preserve and restore Liberian forests focus on creating nature preserves and implementing sustainable management of forest resources.

The ELP has "given me an integrated look at what is affecting the environment," Vohiri says. "It has given me the tools to ask questions. And if I run into a problem, I'm able to call these 34 people as well as the scientists at Berkeley." — Janet Byron

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