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Senior Symposium – Dr. Gordon

White Paper

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### **Abstract**

*In conjunction with the University District Ecological Alliance, the Community Outreach Group of Gonzaga University's Environmental Studies Symposium, seeks to develop the Spokane River as a key educational and recreational asset to the Logan Community through the creation of an access point and environmental education programs at the three local elementary schools. Primarily, our group sought to engage Logan residents in order to assess the feasibility and reception of our goals among community members by hosting a community forum. From this event, we found that most community members wanted to deepen their relationship with the river by implementing our proposed access point and after-school environmental education programs. However, we did not successfully address all of the issues we wanted to. The future Environmental Studies Symposium classes will be tasked with wrestling with the issue of homelessness, designating and designing the actual access point, and getting involved with Environmental Sustainability Education in Eastern Washington all while continually empowering the community into action using the "Just Green Enough" approach to neighborhood greening.*

### **Overview of the Problem**

Today, our urban communities in the United States face great displacement from nature. This is largely the result of a combination of factors, such as our sedentary lifestyles as well as the discriminatory nature of city zoning laws that have historically relegated access to green areas to the wealthier suburbs. This presents communities with a unique problem in which they not only lack a connection to nature, but a connection to each other. Without the power of interpersonal connection and community organizing around the necessary and valuable human connection to nature, communities may encounter serious threats to mental health. Through living and interacting with the Logan Neighborhood and residents, we surmised that the Logan Neighborhood, as lower income neighborhood, could potentially identify as a community suffering from what psychologist Richard Louv termed Nature Deficit Disorder.

Richard Louv created the term Nature Deficit Disorder in his 2005 book *Last Child in the Woods*, to describe the psychological, physical and cognitive costs of human alienation from nature, particularly for children in their vulnerable developing years.<sup>1</sup> Louv claims that a combination of current lifestyle choices including high stress environments, high screen times, car focused culture, along with lack of access to green spaces causes overall human health to decline. A study conducted by the Human-Environment Research Laboratory at the University of Illinois discovered that children as young as 5 showed a significant reduction in symptoms of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder when they engaged with nature.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in another study, researchers found an association between higher neighborhood greenness and slower increases in children's body mass over a two-year period, regardless of residential density.<sup>3</sup> Louv proposes that direct exposure to nature is essential for the physical and emotional health of both children and adults. Outside research supports this claim, showing that exposure to the natural environment can reduce stress, promote a sense of place and improve physical relaxation, mental restoration, positive emotions, social connectedness, and experiences of tranquility and peace.<sup>4</sup> This research presents a strong case for the necessity of access to green space in our communities today, as there are many benefits to overall community health and wellbeing. Therefore, we realized that bringing greater access to the Spokane River could potentially reverse the effects of Nature Deficit Disorder, as well improve the community itself.

However, alongside the benefits of greening of neighborhoods also comes the possibility of gentrification. Historically, green space in American cities has been highly stratified based on income,

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<sup>1</sup> Louv, Richard. "No More "Nature-Deficit Disorder" *Psychology Today*. 28 Jan. 2009. Web. 01 Apr. 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Louv, Richard. Do Our Kids Have Nature-Deficit Disorder?"*Educational Leadership*. Volume 67 Dec. 2009. Web. 01 Apr 2016. Pg 1-7.

<sup>3</sup> Louv, Richard. Do Our Kids Have Nature-Deficit Disorder?"*Educational Leadership*. Volume 67 Dec. 2009. Web. 01 Apr 2016. Pg 1-7.

<sup>4</sup> Warber, Sara L., Ashley A. Dehudy, Matthew F. Bialko, Melissa R. Marselle, and Katherine N. Irvine. "Addressing "Nature-Deficit Disorder": A Mixed Methods Pilot Study of Young Adults Attending a Wilderness Camp."*Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine* 2015 (2015): 1-13. Web.

race, gender, and age.<sup>5</sup> Wealthier citizens have typically occupied the suburbs outside of cities with ample access to parks and other green spaces, while lower income citizens have generally lived near the urban center of a city, with little to no access to these green spaces. The challenge with addressing the problem of access to nature in lower income communities is that sometimes the greening of these spaces improves the aesthetic value and public health of an area to the extent that it drives home prices up, and forces out the very people it sought to help. This creates a unique kind of paradox for those involved in restoration projects in lower income neighborhoods. In Spokane, gentrification occurred when Riverfront Park was developed to showcase Spokane as an environmentally friendly city for Expo '74, displacing many working class communities.<sup>6</sup> The then question becomes, how do we bring greater access and connection to nature for these communities without running the risk of gentrification? One strategy is the "just green enough" approach, which emphasizes the cleanup aspect over the redevelopment aspect of neighborhood greening. This approach generally focuses on small, scattered projects rather than larger civic projects. By honing in on small-scale points of intervention, project managers can distribute access to nature for urban residents evenly rather than creating greater access for property development. The "just green enough" approach also actively engages the population it seeks to serve. By relying on public engagement and activism rather than market strategies or ecological approaches, the "just green enough" strategy ensures that local concerns drive the project. As an extra measure, this approach can be supported by policies that mitigate

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Wolch, J.R., et al. "Urban green space, public health, and environmental justice: The challenge of making cities 'just green enough.'" *Landscape Urban Plan.* (2014), <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2014.01.017>>.

<sup>6</sup> Bryson, Jeremy. "Greening Urban Renewal: Expo '74, Urban Environmentalism and Greenspace on the Spokane Riverfront, 1956-1974." *Journal of Urban History.* 2012.

gentrification such as rent control measures of local homes and businesses.<sup>7</sup> Drawing upon this research, we explored the demographics of the Logan Neighborhood in order to better inform how we approached this problem of mitigating the negative effects of Nature Deficit Disorder without running the risk of gentrification.

### **Logan Neighborhood Demographics**

The Logan Neighborhood is located in the community that surrounds Gonzaga University and where many Gonzaga students reside. Logan is classified as a low income neighborhood according to Spokane Regional Health District's Health Inequities study. The Logan Neighborhood experiences above average rates of obesity and heart disease and below average life expectancy. 46.6- 60.3% of the Logan community is at or below the federal Poverty level; the Logan neighborhood is ranked fifth for suicide rates, and is rated second for percentage of teen pregnancies in Spokane County.<sup>8</sup> The concerns listed on the Logan neighborhood website are principally attributed to poverty, they include, fear of personal safety, hunger, gang violence, threat of theft, poor hygiene, and poor dental care. Additionally, teachers in local elementary schools have identified a "mental health crisis" occurring in young students.<sup>9</sup> With an impoverished community and its accompanying problems comes a lack of quality, well maintained green space.<sup>10</sup> This is evidenced in Logan considering the only green space is a 13 acre city park. Mission Park is a central location in the Logan neighborhood and proposes several

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<sup>7</sup> Wolch, J.R., et al. "Urban green space, public health, and environmental justice: The challenge of making cities 'just green enough.'" *Landscape Urban Plan.* (2014), <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2014.01.017> >.

<sup>8</sup> Spokane Regional Health District, comp. *Odds Against Tomorrow Health Inequities in Spokane County.*

<sup>9</sup> "Gonzaga University, Spokane Washington." Preliminary Findings December 2015. Accessed April 27, 2016. <http://www.gonzaga.edu/Student-Development/MAPS/findings.asp>.

<sup>10</sup> Wolch, J.R., et al. "Urban green space, public health, and environmental justice: The challenge of making cities 'just green enough.'" *Landscape Urban Plan.* (2014), <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2014.01.017> >.

amenities like basketball courts, tennis courts, a play ground, pavilions, and a softball field, yet despite the opportunity for river access (there is a shoreline about 50 feet away from the park's west lawn) there is no point to access the river. We can reasonably deduce, from the lack of real access to wild nature in the Logan community and Logan's health demographics, that there is a potential for nature deficit disorder to develop within this community.

### **Addressing the Issue**

Lack of access to the Spokane river in the Logan neighborhood was a first point of concern. We wanted to provide a cleaned, restored shoreline with a more formal "put in" for canoes and kayaks on the shoreline closest to Mission Park's west lawn and environmental education. We wanted to assess if a recreational access point and increased opportunity for environmental education would interest Logan residents. Most importantly, we wanted our approach to be centered on local concerns that would drive the project, using the aforementioned "Just Green Enough" approach to neighborhood greening. This greening, particularly putting in an access point in Mission Park, is especially controversial in the Logan because of the large homeless population that uses the shoreline near Mission Park as a homeless camp. Therefore we turned to the Logan community itself, trying to find ways to inspire and empower residents to organize around a small-scale point of intervention; in essence, using the improvement of Mission Park as a starting point for potential recreation and educational opportunities without displacing people. Our idea was to reach out to the three local elementary schools in the areas, as well as other environmental education groups, that could help us establish an after school education program centered around this access point. While our group wanted to get the discussion going on this issues, our ultimate goal was to create enough public engagement among community members that they made this project their own.

### **Challenges**

We needed to first address some immediate challenges and logistics, the most troubling of which was homelessness. We noted significant homeless population during our walk throughs of the shoreline next to Mission Park, the bank was littered with remains of abandoned homeless camps as well as evidence of some active camps. A homeless presence presented safety concerns and a potential greening of the area risked providing more accessible terrain for homeless camps. The second concern was became very apparent to us on the walk through, and that was the issue of a railroad that bisected the park lawn and the river bank. Initially this presented the logistical challenge of "how could one safely approach the access point?" We considered an underpass or overpass, or the potential continuation of the Centennial trail over or under the railroad. The railroad was not only a physical inconvenience, but also a potentially political and economic one, in addressing who owned what property and how much funding would be required to commence the project. Our final and chief concern was whether or not the community favored our proposed actions and if the community had any specific concerns of their own regarding river restoration.

### **Methods**

Our methodology revolved around getting as much face time and engagement with the community as we could by attending community meetings, reaching out to actors in the community, such as NGOs, elementary schools in the neighborhood, community leaders, and environmental educators. We sought to merge all of these conversations into one, by facilitating communication between Gonzaga Environmental Studies students and Logan residents through a community forum, dubbed "The Spokane River Community Café." The event took place at the Donut Parade, and in order to attain funding to rent the place, we applied for the Green Fund, who awarded us \$150. We reached out to Logan residents informing them of the event by posting flyers in local businesses, and passing them out door-to-door. We invited specific community leaders, many of whom responded and

attended the event, including Jerry White from the Spokane River Keeper, Nick Velis from UGM, Pete Hanson from St. Al's, Jamie Otsby from the East Valley Outdoor Learning center, and Toni Taylor from Spokane County Water Resources. To facilitate discussion and gain tangible outcomes, we created comment cards with which community members could express their relationship with and hopes for the role of the Spokane River in the Logan neighborhood, rating their relationship to river as follows: negative relationship, no relationship, poor relationship, strong relationship, or positive relationship. In total, eleven people participated. Liaisons from each of the other sub groups attended and presented their progress to the community, and helped the social groups to answer questions specific to their subject matter. After each group presented, we opened the floor for discussion, additional questions, and collaboration.

Another component of our approach to engaging the public was through creating social media platform to share updates and events. Working with Vicki Egesdal from the Inland Northwest Land Conservancy, we created a Facebook page for the U District Ecological Alliance, as well as an email list for those who didn't have a Facebook. We used these platforms consistently through the semester, especially our Facebook page to advertise our central event—the Spokane River Community Café.

## **Findings**

### *Community Forum*

As we used the Community Café as a focal point for assessing the Logan Community's relationship to the Spokane River, as well as comparing our goals for the river with their goals, the Community Café provided the main platform for our findings. Our findings from the Community Café are as follows:

On the comment cards, six circled positive relationship, one circled strong relationship, one circled poor relationship, one circled no relationship, and two were left blank. Community members with a positive relationship with the Spokane River commented that they interact with the river by utilizing the Centennial Trail (walking, running, biking, observing wildlife), swimming in the river, kayaking, or inter-tubing in the river, but the trail usage dominated interaction with the river. However, others who indicated poor or no relationship had similar interactions with the river, also using the Centennial Trail primarily for recreation. Next, we asked the community members to comment on where they would be most likely and least likely to access the river and the least likely. Centennial Trail, Riverfront Park, or Mission Park at Upriver Drive stood out as the most popular access points. Despite community members' varying relationship with the river, all conveyed that they desired more opportunity for interaction with the river, and that they could build a stronger, more positive relationship with the Spokane River with increased and improved access.

We asked how the community felt about an access point in Mission Park. Attendees were all open to the idea, but voiced several concerns such as safety. Pete Hanson, representing St. Al's, personally voiced this concern, speaking about homelessness and the general feel of the area proximal to Mission Park. The UGM representative addressed this point, admitting that safety concerns caused by homelessness are not an easy fix, but offering information about UGM to homeless persons instead of money aids in not enabling the lifestyle. He also assured participants that employees patrol the river bank and UGM's surrounding area and asked them not to settle on the property, if they did so they would not be able to use any of UGM's facilities.

Other comments of concern from the community members included the cleanliness of the Centennial Trail. There is a lot of trash and other undesirable objects around the trail and river. A participant commented that they wished to swim in the river without risks of foreign objects or toxicity

in the water. One woman suggested a more diverse range of trees along the river bank to increase opportunities to bird watch in Spokane. Overall, attendees of the Community Café wanted greater interaction with the river through various types outdoor recreation. The most frequent comment about increasing interaction with the river and the parks in Spokane was through outdoor education for both children and adults. Expressing the aspiration to learn more about the Spokane River and the surrounding wildlife underscores that there is a population within the Logan Neighborhood that cares for the issues regarding the river and wanting to be apart of it. A final and chief concern was that we are all seniors and will soon be leaving Spokane behind, showing us that the desire for this project to be ongoing with at least 11 community members supporting its continuation.

### *General Outreach*

During other events, like those hosted by the Audobaun society and Gonzaga, we met other community members who were able to address some of our initial concerns. Adriane Bogais from the Lands Council informed us that the Burlington Northern Santa Fe owns the railroad that bisects the river from Mission Park, and that dealings with railroad companies often times are quite costly.

We also found that Viki Egsesdal from the Inland northwest Land Conservancy has also applied for the "no child left inside" grant, and offered to be a partner in an outdoor education program. Several members from the Audubon society offered resources for environmental education like programs at the Turnbull National Wildlife Refuge.

### **Recommendations**

With the information acquired from The Spokane River Community Café, Logan community members, and research concerning both gentrification and nature deficit disorder, as well as keeping

in mind demographics we found, the continuation of this project is integral to the development of the Logan neighborhood as a healthier, better educated, and more active community. In order to facilitate improvement in the Logan neighborhood, we recommend collaboration between Gonzaga Environmental Studies students and Jami Otsby, who is coordinating a group of local environmental educators to partner on projects and share ideas, called the Environmental Sustainability Education in Eastern Washington (ESESE). Working collaboratively with this group, we could present environmental education opportunities to local schools that are easy to implement into science classes (field trips, river walks, etc.). After school programs are another viable option and could be a product of a grant called "No Child Left Inside." Jonas Cox, an education professor at GU has applied for this grant and envisions an after school mentoring program, between Gonzaga students and students from local elementary schools. Both of these educational options combat nature deficit disorder in an interactive and community based manner.

Mission Park's dilapidated state as well as litter along the river, we believe, warrants bi-annual or quarterly, community river clean ups. Jerry White, also known as the Spokane River Keeper, may act as an ally in this endeavor. His organization has a program that aids community river clean ups, providing trash bags, and other supplies; they also dispose of the waste. The River Clean ups may serve as an avenue not only for beautification of the area, but also for community engagement and increased interest in the project's success.

Considering the information gleaned about the railroad, we would like to assess more sites in proximity to the Logan neighborhood in which to create a recreational access point. There are several locations along upriver drive, particularly one across the street from Avista that could serve as adequate access points.

To address gentrification, we recommend the continued use of the "just green enough" approach. This approach is grounded in community involvement, and rather than outsourcing green space planning, community members participate in a collective manner to produce the kind of green space that most benefits residents. This requires continued and consistent outreach. One way that this can be furthered is by hosting monthly community forums to inform and engage in a dialogue with interested community partners about the progress of this project. Another way is to use a Charrette Planning Process, once the planning stages for the access point have been achieved. The Charrette Planning Process involves community members in every step of the process, from location selection to actual design and implementation. The Social media pages also can serve as an outreach vehicle, but emailing lists and consistent appearances at Logan community meetings ensure a more effective and comprehensive reach. We strongly recommend the Charrette Planning Process for potential green space and consequently, we recommend implementing communication platforms that keep a majority of the community engaged and informed in the Spokane River restoration process in order to make community members adapt this project as their own.

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