An ECO Girls Origin Story

(Environmental and Cultural Opportunities for Girls)

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I often say that I am an unlikely person to have founded the ECO Girls project. I am a humanities professor whose research focuses on African American and Native American women’s histories. I have appreciated nature and enjoyed the company of trees since I was a young girl, but I did not realize that environmental issues should be important to me until I attended an academic conference in 2005. The 35th Anniversary Conference of the Department of Afroamerican & African Studies at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor became a turning point. A colleague from the School of Natural Resources and Environment, Professor Dorceta Taylor, urged Black studies scholars to take up the environment as a topic. Dr. Taylor noted that Harriet Tubman must have been environmentally conscious in order to help scores of slaves escape from the South. Tubman had to be aware and respectful of nature in order to succeed in her monumental task of escaping slavery herself and then assisting other freedom seekers. Tubman had to know, for instance, which side of trees the moss grew on, where the rivers flowed, and what plants in the woods were edible. At the end of her remarks that day, Dr. Taylor posed what I took to be a challenge. She asked if scholars of Black Studies would try to have an impact on major issues like climate change, or if those professors would just write histories after the fact about how people in Africa and the diaspora had been negatively affected. This lecture led me to see a link between black studies and environmental studies and to imagine my role in those fields in a whole new light.

The event of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, just months after that conference, increased my sense of urgency regarding the environment. We all saw media images of black and poor people suffering because of a deadly storm. A few years later, the earthquake in Haiti of 2010 projected still more images across our TV screens of black community trauma and devastation in the wake of a natural disaster. These seemed to me to be examples—one of them quite close to home—of the way in which black and brown people around the world, people in the Global South, in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and even the American South, will suffer first and seriously as our weather patterns become more erratic and extreme.

As my interest and worry grew, I searched for opportunities to learn more. In 2007, I attended an environmental justice tour of Detroit organized by a group called MELDI that formed to develop environmental leadership among people of color. On that tour I was stunned to see mounds of old automobile manufacturing materials right across the way from a public school, to learn about the construction of a polluting incinerator, and to pass brownfields left behind by corporations along what could have been beautiful riverside knolls. I left that tour with a sense of alarm. I took away the notion that Detroit and other cities like it in the rust belt Midwest have been hard hit by environmental waste and pollution, even as they have been devastated by the loss of capital that could have been used to address such problems. At the same time, I also saw examples of people trying to make change by forming green community organizations and developing urban gardening projects.

I knew then that I wanted to find some way to join with those who were working to make a difference. Because I am a college professor and writer, an educator, my thoughts turned immediately to an environmental education project. This project would have to wait for its development though, as my professional career and young twin daughters demanded significant energy and time. By the year 2010-11, I had earned a sabbatical leave from teaching, which I combined with a research fellowship. I used part of that time to think about possible avenues of local environmental action.

I began to feel that one thing I could do—one small thing in the place where I lived—was to share information about environmental issues and practices of sustainability and flexibility with the most vulnerable communities: people of color and working class families in our urban areas. I decided to start with children, with girls, for personal and political reasons. I have an M.A. in Women’s Studies, and I have always had a strong interest in girls, especially girls of color, and the challenges they face as they form their identities in American society. Girls face a media and social sphere that projects what they should enjoy, how they should appear, and who they should be. Over the last several years, cultural critics like Peggy Orenstein have argued that this projection has grown more and more narrow. Shades of cotton candy pink have taken over girls’ toys and clothing. The princess figure (with her normative features, long hair, ball gowns, and the required Prince Charming) has come to dominate little girls’ media (and toys, and Halloween costumes, and mall stores). Younger and younger girls are watching television shows on Nickelodeon and the Disney Channel about teenagers involved in romantic plot lines. And the ideal of long blond hair and blue eyes as the epitome of beauty has not been dispelled despite the introduction of black Barbie dolls and Disney’s Princess Tiana.

Our popular culture puts boxes around girls that limit their visions of who they can be and what they can do in life. It draws their attention to things that make them think less of themselves (like body size) and to habits that are far from constructive (like an excessive desire for material goods and a fascination with shopping). Because all of this pink-and-pretty fluff is being pushed at them in stores and on TV, girls dream of being princesses rather than scientists. This limits them and the contributions they can make to society. One thing I have always wanted to do for and with girls was to open possibilities by creating alternatives to this hyper-feminized, pinkified cultural sphere. I wanted to help girls to explore their world intellectually and physically, to show them that what they can think, dream and do is more important than how they look.

Introducing girls to an awareness of nature seemed like just the right thing, because nature has a grounding, calming effect that can shut out the noise of consumer culture. Instead of watching *Hannah Montana* or *I, Carly*, girls could be out hiking, getting exercise and learning about trees, plants, and animals. The more they learned and did, I thought, the more their self-confidence in their knowledge and abilities would increase and they would realize through experience that they are special and valued because of what they think, feel, do, and create. Developing a thoughtful and active relationship with and in nature could present an alternative for girls to a stifling media culture.

Besides the benefit to girls in their present lives – enhancing girls’ experiences, broadening their horizons, and strengthening their skill sets – it seemed to me that by educating girls, my project could educate whole communities. We’re familiar with the African adage: It takes a village to raise a child. Well, my thinking was: It takes a girl to save a modern village. Women are the major decision makers in households about domestic life: where and how to live, what to eat, how to spend, what to buy. If girls who will become those women start learning early that our lives depend upon the earth and that our ways of life can have positive or negative effects on the environment, which in turn shapes our human possibilities—then as women, they can steer their families and communities toward sustainable, resilient choices.

The idea was that environmental consciousness, respect for nature, and a desire to reach for balance with the natural world, would become a part of these girls’ sense of self and a natural aspect of how they lived their lives. These notions would not seem foreign to them, or external to their communities. Girls of color would not hold the sentiment that we still hear too often today that environmentalism is a “white thing” that does not concern black or minority communities. They would not be disadvantaged in facing a future of uncertainty and environmental challenge because of their location in Ypsilanti or Detroit, or because of their lack of proximity to green spaces, wild places, or environmental education programs. And by adapting early to a way of being that is deeply conscious of natural systems and environmental challenges, these girls would be prepared to help their families and communities adapt to, confront, and perhaps even prevent the most negative effects of climate change.

My hope was that ten years from that time or twenty years, or thirty – girls in the program, as well the female college and graduate students who teach the girls (and thereby learn alongside them), would be located in Michigan cities as well as places around the world. They would perhaps be pursuing careers in sciences, the arts, education, or social change while carrying an abiding respect for the natural world, practicing habits of sustainable living, and serving as leaders in their communities. When I closed my eyes and imagined these girls decades into the future, they were bright stars; they were glowing points of light that could help our communities to weather the coming storms. In this moment on our earth, we human beings are facing new and unfamiliar environmental challenges. We need to educate a generation of children who will be prepared to understand those challenges and help to solve them. The long term goal for ECO Girls was to give these children a head start for tomorrow—for all of our sakes.

So that was the vision for ECO Girls before it had a name. This project was my first experience with developing a community program. And an early, significant piece of advice that I received from Claudia DeMegret, founder of Green Girls in New York City, was that I should proceed with openness and a willingness to try and fail. In 2010 I applied for a grant, developed a website, looked for partners to help build the project, and took a leap of faith. I always imagined ECO Girls as an environmental humanities project that linked nature with creative expression and the cultural aspects of our daily lives. I am convinced that people relate to nature through cultural values and stories—things that their families did or their communities cherished. In order to teach about environmental issues, I felt we needed to include story, creativity, and cultural values as a major component of the project. Through this combined environmental-cultural framework, I hoped the girls would come to understand that the life we enjoy derives from the earth, and that many communities have old stories and beliefs about why we should cherish these gifts of the earth as well as our relationships with one another. I organized what I had begun to think of as an “eco-cultural” curriculum through an emphasis on five themes: ecological literacy, food, water, energy/climate change, sustainability.

With a staff made up of a diverse group of women, ranging from Department of Afroamerican and African studies staff to recent UM alumnae and enrolled graduate and undergraduate students, ECO Girls became active starting in September of 2011. We raised over $50,000 in grants, local business, university, and parental support, which allowed us to fund our efforts for three academic year programs and two summer camps. In order to support Michigan families in need, we provided scholarships for girls on a sliding scale and included free, healthy meals and snacks for all participants. We hosted over 30 successful weekend events for girls ranging from 3 to 6 hours each in Ann Arbor and in Detroit, including field trips to the Leslie Science and Nature Center, UM Museum of Natural History, Nichols Arboretum, Matthaei Botanical Gardens and Campus Martius Park. We organized two weeklong summer camps with 30 girls participating in activities on the UM central campus in Ann Arbor and at the UM Biological Station in northern Michigan.

All of our events were augmented by a curriculum that connected education about nature with cultural values and creative expression. For instance, our study of healthy food has included: examining seedpods from a cacao tree, learning about the benefits of fair trade chocolate and hearing traditional chocolate stories from indigenous South America; learning about food security in our community at the local food rescue bank and organizing a drive for donations; visiting local farms and farmers’ markets, talking with farmers about their work, harvesting fruit, and cooking meals together based on family recipes; illustrating a story about animals who gather for a meal and celebrate the value of generosity; and writing and performing a skit about factory farms. Each weekend session with the girls also included activities that encouraged girls to reflect on who they were within the context of place/environment and community rather than in comparison to the narrow expectations of popular “tween” culture. Some of these activities have been: guided haiku poetry writing, essays to reflect on what being eco-friendly means to them, and listening to professional storytellers tell stories about plants and animals in diverse cultures.

ECO Girls aimed to ground girls’ developing identities in a sense of connection to and knowledge of the natural world, to further girls’ sense of bodily confidence through physical outdoor activity (like hiking in the woods, helping harvest crops on an Afro-cultural community farm in Detroit and tree planting with a community non-profit), to encourage creative and cultural production by and for girls, and to provide girls with a foundation for future leadership roles in their communities in the face of pressing environmental challenges. By holding many of our events on campus and having UM students serve as mentors, ECO Girls also exposed girls from diverse backgrounds to a positive university context, helping to break barriers of alienation for future college attendance. Based in Ann Arbor, ECO Girls has had a special interest in recruiting girls from Detroit, a city beset by environmental waste and pollution problems and as well as financial challenges.

From 2011-2014, ECO Girls participants met approximately once monthly during the academic year. Each of these meetings taught girls new knowledge and skills, leading, we hope, to a greater sense of self-efficacy in the world around them. Our project resonated with members of the community. We garnered newspaper and magazine coverage and were featured in two stories on Channel 4 News in Detroit. This media coverage can be accessed from the Press page on our website: <http://www.environmentforgirls.org>. Currently, we are operating with the remaining funds of our last grant, and we are planning a hiatus due to both funding constraints and the departure of key staff members who are moving to other locations.

Developing ECO Girls has been exhilarating and deeply satisfying even amidst the stress of starting something new and unfamiliar. Although the project of ECO Girls has been very different from my academic work, I see connections between the two fields of endeavor. I care deeply for girls and women, people of color, poor people, and disempowered people of any background. I am dedicated to the work of preserving their pasts (through historical research and writing) and their futures (through community engagement and education). For the knowledge embedded in those pasts – the stories of creative resilience and survival – guided our communities through many a trial and can light our way forward even now.

This project has been a delight and a boon for me, the ECO Girls staff, and, I hope, for the girls involved and their families. At the end of three years, I am preparing to go on academic leave to study environmental history with the support of the Mellon Foundation. The ECO Girls project is moving into a stage of hibernation that will, perhaps, result in a new season of life and growth.