

Cynthia Desmet Villar

Professor Laura J. Bishop

Climate Change and Global Justice

23 February 2020

Greenovation: Future of Technology and Sustainability

The United World College is a collection of eighteen international boarding schools located around the world, from Swaziland to Japan and everywhere in between. Formed in the 1960s as a conflict-resolution strategy in the cold-war era, UWC aims to educate the next generation of global leaders. If we zoom into a remote area of Northern New Mexico, there is an old hotel in the middle of the mountains where UWC USA is located. Here, two hundred students from over a hundred countries are united to learn from one another, celebrate diversity, and devote their time to rigorous academic endeavors and experiential learning through community service, global leadership, and environmental sustainability. This small school, isolated in nature, has effectively created a close-knit community while imitating a microcosm of the world, demonstrating how different cultures can peacefully and actively coexist.

In order to live up to its mission statement to make “education a force to unite people, nations and cultures for peace and a sustainable future”¹, UWC hosts an Annual Conference, a weekend dedicated to discussing a pressing global issue. During this stimulating weekend, the institution invites relevant speakers to present their ideas about the topic through presentations, workshops, and interactive activities. In doing so, they encourage their own students and alumni to participate as well as a way to promote youth education and leadership, demonstrating how much students can learn from one another. This year’s UWC USA 2020 Youth Annual Conference theme was “Greenovation: Future of Technology and Sustainability.” This conference, held on February 21 through 22,

¹ “What Is UWC?” *UWC*, www.uwc.org/about.

addressed climate change through a multi-lens perspective, analyzing both climate mitigation and adaptation through traditional and experiential learning. It tackled complex social, political, and economic questions such as: Can society reverse, stop, or mitigate further climate change? How do we protect people hurt or displaced by climate change?

Inspired by the documentary “Climate Refugee” by Michael Nash and the article “Climate Refugees and International Law” by Sumudu Atapattu, I made a proposal for a workshop to be presented at the Annual Conference, and was lucky to get selected. As a returning alumni, I explored how climate change is changing geographic and political borders, displacing populations, and altering culture. By discussing the issue of environmental refugees, I catalyzed a conversation about what international law should do to help and what personal responsibilities countries have. To do so, I gave a situational workshop where the participants imagined themselves taking the role of environmental policy makers giving advice to Congress on how to deal with climate refugees in a just and equitable manner. The goal was to think creatively about ideas and actionable policy.

During the weekend, relevant speakers coming from all over the world provided workshops on topics such as waste management, biodiversity, and environmental stress in developing countries. To create further engagement, the Conference also included a sustainable art exhibition, an indigenous environmental prayer, and a nature sunrise hike. The Annual Conference is based on the premise that one can only be truly ethical in relation to something that one can see, feel, understand, love, and have faith in. Currently, we live in a world where we have become more alienated from our biological roots than ever before, having transcended the constraints of our biology with technology. Hence, while discussing issues on environmental justice and policy reform is important, UWC realizes that these policy changes and these conversations are mere band-aids that provide symptom-relief. However, they

don't solve the issue that our modern humanity depends on the biological world for emotional and material needs. Hence, going on hikes or forming part of a sustainable art exhibition are ways in which we can reconnect with the natural world². In this way, the Annual Conference is fostering a holistic ethical paradigm that meets the challenge of global climate change by placing the emphasis on both reason and feeling.

The Annual Conference in its entirety is open to the public, whether in person or online through the Facebook livestream. Since UWC is quite geographically isolated, most of the physical audience consists of students, faculty, staff, and people from neighboring towns and partner schools from New Mexico. However, it is important to emphasize the significant role that the online community plays in the conference. Since the 1960s, UWC has fostered a uniquely loyal global network of over 60,000 alumni, working in different influential positions of society across the globe. As a result, the audience is typically composed of motivated students and alumni who embrace an idealistic perspective of the world and an urge to contribute to its peace, welfare, and equity. Since climate change is a pressing global issue, I believe that this is the correct audience to provide such information and training to, as they are individuals interested in transforming ideas into tangible global change.

Although the conference is inclusive in its mission and its efforts, it could do more to overcome the underlying sense of exclusivity that arises from the geographic isolation of the institution and the lack of visibility it receives outside of the UWC community. In addition, having these conversations once a year does not necessarily promote a sustained discussion on the matter. I

²Biophilia: "biological affinity for the non human world that is instrumental to health, productivity & well-being" (Moore).

believe that the UWC could improve its impact in a variety of ways. First, all eighteen UWC campuses could conduct an Annual Conference on the same dates about the same globally pressing issue. Secondly, the Annual Conference could utilize the vast loyal and influential network of alumni to their advantage to spread the message and be more inclusive. Lastly, the social media and marketing team could increase their efforts by connecting with both neighboring communities and educational institutions to spread their impact and their visibility. Potentially, other academic institutions could be inspired to form a similar event at their own campuses. Moreover, in terms of making sure that the effects of the Annual Conference do not quickly subside, UWC could shift their focus from dialogue into workable ideas and realistic solutions. A common criticism directed to the Annual Conference and to the UWC community is that it is unrealistically ideal in the sense that the community lives in an isolated bubble where they have intellectual conversations about complex issues such as climate change and later do nothing to help mitigate it. While it is important to note that most of the students are between sixteen to eighteen years old, I do believe that it would be a very productive idea to encourage students to exercise innovative solutions and undertake certain low-scale projects as small steps to transforming the ideas into long-term actions.

Despite there being certain ameliorations that could be made to maximize the Annual Conference's impact in a long-term manner, it still remains an excellent way of utilizing experiential and engaging education to stir important environmental and political conversations among young adults from across the globe. I feel so grateful to have been able to form a part of this year's conference and to have been given the opportunity to contribute to an impactful intergenerational and intragenerational discussion on climate change. By focusing on the importance of environmental

issues, analyzing possible solutions, and reconnecting with our biological roots, the Annual Conference has provided a space for environmental action to be inspired.

Bibliography

- Moore, Kathleen Dean., et al. "Stephen R. Kellert. For the Love and Beauty of Nature." *Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril*, Trinity University Press, 2010, pp. 373–378.
- "What Is UWC?" *UWC*, www.uwc.org/about.