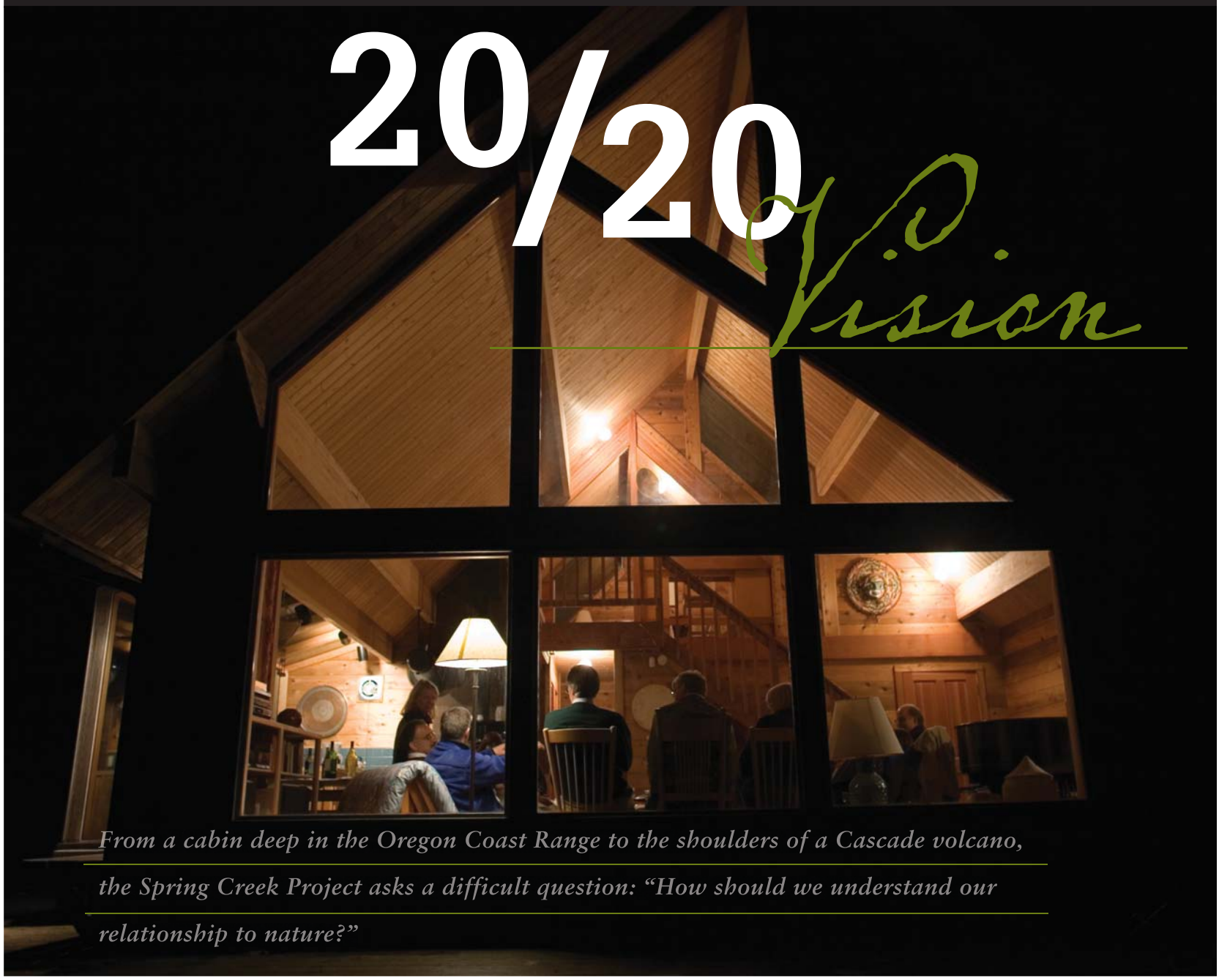
Reprinted by the Division of University Advancement, Oregon State University
from Terra: A World of Research and Creativity at Oregon State University, Vol. 1 No. 1, Spring 2006
oregonstate.edu/terra

Oregon State University OSU

20/20 Vision



From a cabin deep in the Oregon Coast Range to the shoulders of a Cascade volcano, the Spring Creek Project asks a difficult question: "How should we understand our relationship to nature?"

By Nick Houtman

In 1987, Franz Dolp found what he was looking for: a place where nature beckoned, about 40 acres of cutover forestland in the Oregon Coast Range along a quick running tributary to the Marys River. He felt inspired by the remaining moss-covered forest and a spring that emerged high on a mountainside. After buying the land, he built a wood cabin with tall ceilings and expansive windows. He planted more than 10,000 cedar, hemlock and fir seedlings. He loved this place and wanted it to inspire others.

"Maybe I should have asked not how we can bring wildness into our lives, but how we can remember to notice the wildness in every sweating pore, every stewed carrot, every solid step; in the morning air noisy with rain; in the reeling stars."

— Kathleen Dean Moore, *The Pine Island Paradox, 2004*

Running water has long held meaning for Kathleen Dean Moore, director of the Spring Creek Project. Her book Riverwalking: Reflections on Moving Water *(Lyons and Burford, 1996), received the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Book Award.*

"He said he was planting an old-growth forest," says Kathleen Dean Moore, a friend and philosophy professor at Oregon State University. "He was investing in a future that he would never see, but he felt nourished by this land, and he felt a responsibility to nourish the trees. Every spring, he went out with a hoe to release the trees from the fallen leaves and encroaching brush."

Dolp, an economist and poet, died in 2004. Before his death, he worked with Moore to create a program that carries out his vision for the cabin to serve as a retreat for writers and naturalists. Today, operating out of the Department of Philosophy under Moore's direction, OSU's Spring Creek Project for Ideas, Nature and the Written Word brings poets, writers and scientists together to explore our relationship with the natural world. The cabin on Shotpouch Creek hosts retreats, meetings and other Spring Creek events.

Moore and her colleagues have taken their mission well beyond these mountains. Financed by a private donor, they have held gatherings and academic conferences in Corvallis and a public presentation attended by more than 1,800 people in Portland. With the U.S. Forest Service, they sponsor an annual poet's retreat at the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest east of Eugene. Moore and Associate Director Charles Goodrich regularly lecture or give readings in the Northwest and throughout the country.

Their goal: philosophical clarity in our relationship to nature. "As a philosopher, I believe that ideas matter, that what people believe shapes the decisions they make," says Moore. "The more cogent and clear-thinking their ideas, the wiser their decisions will be. On the other hand, confusion or disagreement about the fundamental ideas of a practice lead to incoherent policies or stalemate.

"For example, what is a forest? Is it a commodity like a seam of copper? Is it a cathedral, a sacred grove? Politicians and forest managers are accustomed to consulting scientists for information that will help them make good decisions. But they less often consult artists and humanists who can help them understand what forests mean in the human experience — important information for those who would design forest policies in a complex and changing social context."

Mount St. Helens Foray

Few places provide as dramatic a focus for Spring Creek as Mount St. Helens. On a warm July evening in 2005, Moore, Goodrich and two-dozen poets, writers, scientists and artists circle around a campfire dug into loose pumice on a windswept ridge near the mountain. The deep carpet of popcorn-sized rock makes for uncertain footing. The mountain's 1980 eruption had reshaped the landscape with no regard for trees, wildlife, people or even well-honed scientific theories.

One member of the group, author Ursula LeGuin, asks if they are in any danger. "Some shaking is possible, but no ballistics are expected in the next few days," replies Lynn Burditt, U.S. Forest Service official. Fred Swanson, a Forest Service geologist and co-organizer of the event, notes that knowledge of the mountain's underground environment is "crude."

Research at the national monument has overturned theories of how nature responds to upheaval, and the Spring Creek group's conversation often turns to scientific surprises. Ecologists describe biological diversity that blossomed unexpectedly after the eruption. They point to populations of western toads that are flourishing here while they are declining elsewhere. They tell of hot gases and rocks that turned Spirit Lake into a microbial stew resembling a pulp mill lagoon and how fish eventually returned. Geologists talk about the plumbing under the mountain and how often it has cracked and heaved in cycles of cataclysm.

In the face of such power, there is also poetry and song. Folksinger Libby Roderick sings "Thinking Like a Mountain" and "If the World Were My Lover." Goodrich reads a Denise Levertov poem, "Open Secret," evoking the power of mountains as metaphors for human aspiration. They watch the full moon rise and roll up a neighboring slope. As moonlight strikes the valley floor behind them, a chorus of coyotes yips and howls. Nighthawks dip and climb overhead.

Beautiful as the scene is, this is no sentimental journey. They are here to work. They trek through the "blast zone" where dark forests, once destroyed, have given way to a carnival of new life. They find pockets of sphagnum moss, Indian paintbrush and penstamen, some of the "biological legacies" that survived the blast, paving the way for diversity by seeding the new landscape. They visit forests that had been left standing after layers of volcanic ash had covered every leaf and branch.

They discuss the differences between human-caused and natural catastrophe — and the meaning of recovery. The point is to think hard and deep about nature's resilience in the face of destruction and to reconsider the ideas that define the role of humans in these natural processes.

At the end of three days, they give a public presentation at the Windy Ridge Visitor's Center. Mount St. Helens' steaming crater, which geologists say could rebuild the collapsed mountain in as little as nine years, broods over the deliberations.

Left Brain, Right Brain

OSU biologist Mark Hixon has participated in several of Spring Creek's gatherings. The project "offers a remarkable opportunity for environmental scientists to integrate their intellectual, left-brained worldview with the spiritual, right-brained perspective of environmental writers, poets, and artists," he says. These exercises are "essential for successful conservation and sustainability efforts."

Moore, Goodrich and their colleagues bring diverse academic and literary expertise to the task. Moore has a Ph.D. in the philosophy of law. She has written seven books, including three compilations of essays exploring the cultural values of wet, wild places. That has not always been her focus. Her first book, published in 1989, explores the moral justification for presidential pardons. Since then, she has won a Pacific Northwest Bookseller's Award for *Riverwalking* (1995) and the Sigurd Olson Nature Writing Award for *Holdfast* (1999). In 2005, she won the Oregon Book Award for *The Pine Island Paradox*.

In addition to several volumes of poetry, Goodrich has written a book of essays (*The Practice of Home*) and edited two anthologies of poems.

The Spring Creek Project has inspired students such as OSU marine biology graduate Roly Russell. "Places like Shotpouch are necessary," says Russell, now a postdoctoral researcher at Columbia University's Earth Institute. "The overwhelming ecological issues that face our society won't be fixed by a better understanding of the underlying

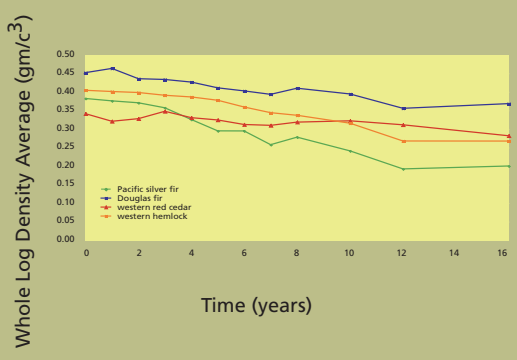
(continued on back page)

Science blends with art and writing in Spring Creek's Long-Term Ecological Reflections (LTER) project at the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest. In 2004, nature writer and scientist Robert Michael Pyle served as the first LTER writer-in-residence. He focused on a 200-year-long log decomposition study. Its purpose: to understand growth and decay cycles in the forest. Other participating writers have included Robin Kimmerer, author of Gathering Moss *(OSU Press, 2005); Scott Slovic, writer, critic and educator; and poet Pattiann Rogers. The U.S. Forest Service co-sponsors the project.*

"The moss grows, the raven barks, the trees go to soil — first hemlocks, then firs, finally cedar. All the while the decomp team is there, watching how the cookies crumble. Maybe looking to the future is a way of hoping there will still be something to see when we get there. Maybe it's the only way to make sure of it."

— Robert Michael Pyle
"The Long Haul," Orion magazine
September/October 2004

200-Year Log Decomposition Study
Whole Log Density Averages – H.J.Andrews Experimental Forest



Tree species lose mass (through density) at varying rates. Above are data for Pacific silver fir (Abies amabilis), Douglas fir (Pseudotsuga menziesii), western red cedar (Thuja plicata) and, western hemlock (Tsuga heterophylla). (Unpublished data, Mark Harmon, the Richardson Chair in the OSU Department of Forest Science.)

Researcher Profile

Kathleen Dean Moore is Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and the founding director of the Spring Creek Project for Ideas, Nature, and the Written Word. She specializes in environmental ethics and philosophy and nature. She has published three award-winning books of essays: *The Pine Island Paradox* (Milkweed Editions, 2004); *Holdfast: At Home in the Natural World* (Lyons Press, 1999, 2004); and *Riverwalking: Reflections on Moving Water* (Harcourt Brace, 1996). Moore's essays are widely published and anthologized, appearing in magazines such as *Orion*, *Discover*, *Audubon*, *Wild Earth*, *Hope*, and *Field and Stream*. She is the author of *Pardons: Justice, Mercy, and the Public Interest*, which explores the moral justification for presidential pardons, and a textbook on critical reasoning. At OSU, where she was twice named a Master Teacher, she teaches a Philosophy of Nature course, which meets in the high Cascade mountains.

A Premier Forest Research Facility

The H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest, site of Spring Creek's Long-Term Ecological Reflections program, is one of the world's foremost centers for environmental research. OSU scientists and their students use the 15,800-acre facility in the Cascade mountains for studies of land use, climate, biodiversity, hydrology and other disciplines, often in collaboration with state and federal agencies and other universities. Established by the U.S. Forest Service in 1948, the Andrews forest became one of the first sites of the National Science Foundation's Long-Term Ecological Research program in 1980. OSU research in forest ecology, much of it done at the Andrews, achieved the number one national ranking in a recent analysis of research productivity published by Ecological Society of America.

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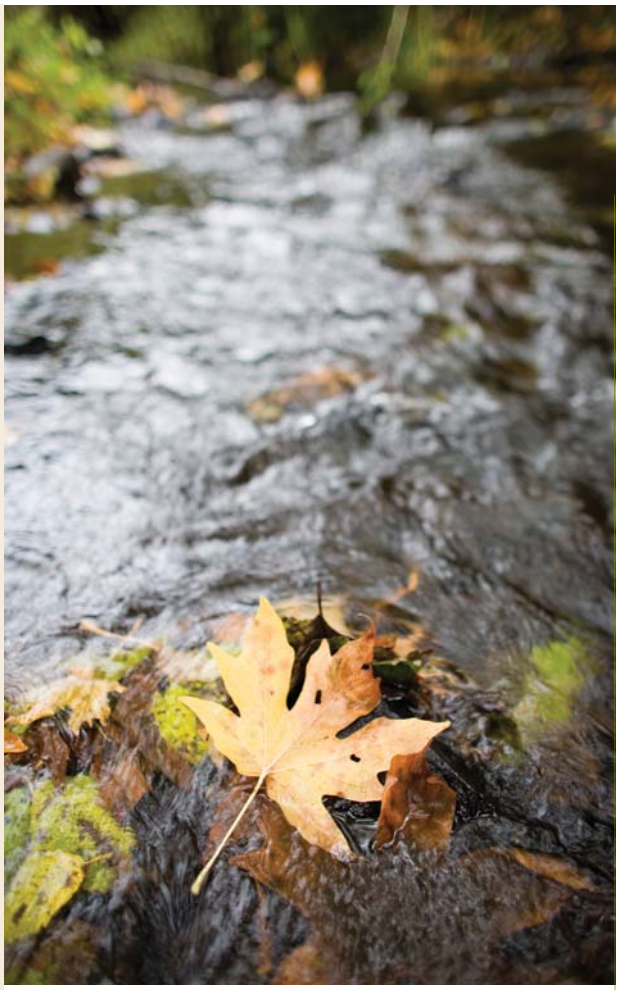

Shotpouch Creek flows out of the Coast Range into the Marys River.

science alone. We need to have places that foster interactions and discussions between people who understand various facets of the issues involved."

In 2004, Russell spent two days at the Shotpouch cabin with a small group of OSU students and faculty. Their topic: science and art as sources of knowledge and ways to communicate in a sustainable society. "This didn't fall into the typical training of scientists like myself. Yet truly cross-disciplinary discussions about what leads people to care and pay attention to their environment are fundamental if we hope to move toward a more sustainable future," he says.

Toward that end, Spring Creek fosters storytelling. Told through poetry, song or scientific report, stories evoke common human values that link people across barriers of culture, politics or religion, say Moore and Goodrich. "On a practical level, it is the most powerful way to bridge different viewpoints, to meet people face-to-face and hear their stories. You can't abstract people into a single position," says Goodrich. "Stories reveal the whole of a life.

"Some scientists are looking to people who specialize in storytelling. And many writers find the stories of science to be very compelling and add a precision that can be missing in lyrical and metaphorical language."

In addition to eliciting stories, Spring Creek programs create an atmosphere that inspires listening, sharing and creative thinking, a kind of leadership training for Spring Creek's mission to "re-imagine the place of humans in the natural world."

"We're just getting started," says Moore. Future Spring Creek programs will focus on ideas related to land ownership, the commons and watershed health.

With the Forest Service, Spring Creek sponsors the Long-Term Ecological Reflections project at the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest (see sidebar on the inside spread). The plan is to bring writers and poets to the forest annually for a week at a time for the next 200 years. The resulting record of creative responses to the forest will help us to understand what forests mean in the human experience.

"Imagine if we had started this project 200 years ago, with Lewis and Clark, what we would know about the changing human response to the land?" Moore says. t

Read more about the cabin on Shotpouch Creek and Spring Creek programs at ***springcreek.oregonstate.edu/***

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