

# What Does Sustainability Look Like in Nebraska?

## A Conversation Worth Having

By **JAY LEIGHTER, PH.D.**

WHAT is the value of listening to someone else's point of view? What is the value of explaining my own point of view to people who think differently than myself? What is the value of a conversation on critical Nebraska resources among people with diverse experiences and backgrounds? What is the value of conversation leading to a set of questions about Nebraska resources and then being able to answer those questions in the moment? What is the value of developing opportunities for the citizens of Nebraska to do all of these things while focusing on the topics of land, food, water, energy and materials?

These are big questions that get to the core purposes of the Conversations Conference on Nebraska Environment and Sustainability (CCNES). If the value of these activities is high, and we believe it is, then the CCNES are critical for raising the level of discourse among Nebraska citizens about resource use and conservation in Nebraska.

Nebraska has a unique combination of resources. Our well-educated populace, location over the second-largest aquifer in the world and enormous potential for producing food and renewable energy make Nebraska well situated in a world that faces an uncertain energy future and growing shortages of water and other natural resources.

*When people engage in discussion that fosters critical thinking, critical listening, perspective taking and the articulation of one's own point of view, the collective understanding of a given topic is increased.*

On Nov. 2, over 150 people from the Omaha area met at Creighton University to participate in the first CCNES and to discuss these resources. The participants included engineers, architects, industry and business executives and managers, representatives from a variety of nonprofit organizations, scholars and high school and college students. This face-to-face event came on the heels of a preconference electronic discussion about these resources, and it precedes three remaining conferences in Lincoln, Grand Island and Scottsbluff in the coming year.

Convened by the Joslyn Institute for Sustainable Communities, the CCNES is the product of a partnership with the Sustainability Leadership Institute and four institutions of higher learning across the state: Creighton University, University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), Central Community College and Western Nebraska Community College. The CCNES is designed with simple principles in mind:

- ◆ Create space for citizens to engage in meaningful conversations.
- ◆ Provide resources for facilitating these conversations including access to information, experts on the respective resource topics, people to record conversations in order to inform simultaneously and subsequent conversations.

- ◆ Develop an atmosphere where the collective expectation is for participants to learn from one another, question one another and explore the environmental and sustainability issues of Nebraska.
- ◆ Build from the conversations in each conference.
- ◆ Develop recommendations for individual and collective action.

The conference design affords a unique setting to explore the five resources—land, water, food, energy and materials—one at a time and then in combination. Many of the conversations at the Omaha event included remarks, conclusions and questions about the interconnectivity of the five resources. Thus, participants not only learned about these resources on their own but, more importantly, the ways in which a sustainable future for Nebraska depends on the understanding of all critical resources.

When people engage in discussion that fosters critical thinking, critical listening, perspective taking and the articulation of one's own point of view, the collective understanding of a given topic is increased. A classic, sometimes deserved, criticism of events such as the CCNES is that what is needed is more action and less talk. One point of view on this debate is that all action requires purposeful, structured and action-oriented communication in order to develop the plans, policies and projects that lead to effective action. Without overstating what was achieved in this regard during the Omaha CCNES, there were several action-oriented outcomes developed by the participants in the conversations.

1. The identification of resources (information, experts, benchmark projects) that will be useful for participants to focus on action after the conference.
2. As was stated above, the development of coalitions of people with similar interests for action.
3. Better understanding of the issues to make more informed and higher quality decisions.
4. A higher level of public commitment to work toward a more sustainable future.
5. A commitment to understanding and developing baseline measurements on all resources so that improvement on any one can be documented and understood in context.
6. A realization that regionalism and competition needs to be dealt with through conversation and cooperation.
7. Coming to terms with the notion that only in rare instances is a single solution available. For each issue, it is necessary to understand complexity and trade-offs.
8. A commitment to research the policies that influence (often negatively) the practices of the citizens of the state of Nebraska.
9. A commitment to include experts and citizens, each of which is critical, in the decision-making process.
10. Economics matter. A realization that economic incentives for sustainable practices will often be the best solution for changing public behavior.

**Opportunities for the Lincoln,**

### Grand Island and Scottsbluff CCNES

Perhaps the most important outcome of the Omaha CCNES, one that was echoed time and again by the Omaha participants, is the opportunity to build on the first conference. Participants in the Omaha CCNES expressed not only appreciation for the creation of this unique event but also a desire to see the energy and commitment of their work carry forward to the remaining three events. Ultimately, the CCNES highlights the need for more opportunities for conversation as one means for raising the level of discourse on these five critical resources and, thus, improving our collective capacity to create a more sustainable future in Nebraska.

Southeastern Nebraskans will have an opportunity to engage in provocative, resourceful conversations at the CCNES on Feb. 11, 2011, at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, organized with the support of the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10

*Curiosity  
never retires*



### Mix & Mingle at the OLLI New Year's Open House Sunday, January 9, 2011

1:30 p.m. Doors Open

2:30 p.m. Special musical program

"The Music of Poetry/The Poetry of Music" presented by John Walker, musician and retired Nebraska Wesleyan professor of philosophy.\*

Open to the public at the Nebraska Champions Club  
707 Stadium Drive, Lincoln, Neb.  
(directly west of Memorial Stadium)

- Review new courses
- Meet our instructors

OLLI offers 26 different courses starting in January 24, and runs through March 5, 2011. What will it be? History, science, health, politics, world affairs, basic computer skills, literature, travel, leisure activities or the arts? The choice is yours. Remember, there are no tests and no grades! The eight-week Elderquest\* course is open to the public and will be streamed on line to home computers or to congregate sites in Lincoln and Omaha. Special events include the Winter Lecture Series at the Unitarian Church, The Mystical Harp by Kathleen Wychulis and computer seminars on basics and photography.

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For more information, visit [olli.unl.edu](http://olli.unl.edu), call 472-6265, e-mail [olli@unl.edu](mailto:olli@unl.edu)

**Not A Member?**  
Take advantage of our mid-year reduced membership fee of \$50 which includes a \$25 course credit. Not good with any other membership discounts.



\*The Nebraska Humanities Council (NHC) provides major funding for this program. The NHC receives support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Nebraska State Legislature, the Nebraska Cultural Endowment, and private donations.



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## Questions from the CCNES Forum

ASSUM[ING] climate change and climate variability may reduce the current level of productivity of land in various areas across the globe, how might this trend impact Nebraska's economy, land ownership and land use?

—*Sandra Scofield, director of the Nebraska Rural Initiative and land resource coordinator*

NEBRASKA ranks 47 out of 51 for Energy Efficiency.

What are we doing wrong in Nebraska? Would you be more energy conscious if our electricity and heating fuels cost more? Is there another motivating factor, besides price, ... [that] would cause you to use less energy than you do now?

—*Daniel Lawse, coordinator of sustainable practices at Metropolitan Community College and energy resource coordinator*

## Sustainability from page 7

School of Natural Resources and the Chancellor's Commission on Sustainability.

Conference attendees don't have to wait until the conference day to begin contributing to the topic areas. Conversations are well underway beginning with the Omaha Creighton conference held on Nov. 2 and continuing online.

Area resource specialists helping initiate the conversations include:

- ◆ **Water**
- Jim Goeke**, research hydrologist and professor with UNL Conservation and Survey Division
- Dan Snow**, research associate professor, School of Natural Resources; laboratory services director, UNL's Water Sciences Laboratory
- ◆ **Land**
- Sandra Scofield**, director, Nebraska Rural Initiative
- Mark Kuzila**, professor of soil science, School of Natural Resources, UNL
- ◆ **Energy**
- Daniel Lawse**, energy expert and coordinator of sustainable practices, Metropolitan Community College
- Todd Hall**, vice president, consumer services, Lincoln Electric Systems
- ◆ **Food**
- Jim Crandall**, associate director, Nebraska Cooperative Development Center, UNL
- Elaine Cranford**, cooperative business development specialist, Center for Applied Innovation, UNL

**Kelly Peterson**, outreach program specialist, Nebraska Rural Initiative

◆ **Materials**

**Deb Hansen**, architectural designer, Davis Design

**Wayne Drummond**, dean, College of Architecture, UNL

The Grand Island and Scottsbluff programs are scheduled on May 26 and Aug. 19, 2011, respectively. Registrations for all three conferences are currently being accepted online.

The CCNES expands upon the rich foundation already established by the Nebraska Sustainability Leadership Workshops (NSLW) conducted by JISC and SLI in 2008 and 2009 for civic and community leaders in 22 communities across the state. Funding for the CCNES is generously provided through continued support from the Nebraska Environmental Trust, the Nebraska Investment Finance Authority, the Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality and Lincoln Electric Systems. Visit [www.nslw.org/conversations.html](http://www.nslw.org/conversations.html) for additional information.

**Jay Leichter, Ph.D.**, joined the Department of Communication Studies at Creighton University in 2006 where he teaches courses in cross-cultural communication, small group communication, interpersonal communication and public speaking. As an ethnographer of communication, he studies local public and political discourse and tries to understand how culture and communication intersect and influence the settings and scenes in which such communication takes place. A consultant with the Joselyn Institute for Sustainable Communities since 2008, Leichter moderated the Omaha CCNES event and will do so again in Scottsbluff, Neb., for the August 2011 program.

## Review from page 9

fact that Ann Arbor and Madison received more attention for such activities.

In subsequent years, Lasch increasingly blamed liberals for the spread of consumerism, deepening self-absorption, rising individualism and the erosion of family life, which he thought undermined the possibility of substantive social reform. He also came to despise the student radicalism of the 1960s. Lasch thought "hedonism, self-expression, doing your own thing, dancing in the streets, drugs, and sex [were] a formula for political impotence and a new despotism" and that the student radicals had "traded self-government for self-expression." Upon returning to Iowa City for a visit after he had joined the history department at Northwestern, Lasch thought the "whole atmosphere had changed" and had "become very ugly, full of recriminations, full of conspiracy theories of the wildest kind." The once "sensible people" he knew at Iowa had embraced the "conspiratorial view of history."

By the 1980s, Lasch began to embrace Populism. He used his "own Midwestern progressive heritage" in his search for groups who had resisted the changes in American culture and doubted the march of progress. Lasch turned to the Populist movement, regionalists, agrarians, naturalists and authors who embodied all these movements, such as Wendell Berry. Lasch became more sympathetic to the conservative opponents of cultural radicalism and embraced what he called the "generalized, ill-defined revolution against 'permissiveness.'" Lasch thought that liberals were directly contributing to the desecration of family life and local culture and that the efforts of liberal elites to "deparochialize people" resulted in a nation of people "with no roots."

In his scholarship, Lasch emphasized the "particularities of place and time" in American historical development and saw workable democracy linked to "kinship ties, local and regional traditions, and attachments to the soil," which were undermined by the "deracinated, disoriented outlook that is so often confused, nowadays, with intellectual liberation." He echoed Simone Weil's call for rootedness and embraced what he called

CONTINUED ON PAGE 11