A Conversation About Conservation:
Buffalo State Students Picture Great Lakes Sustainability
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Buffalo State Students Picture Great Lakes Sustainability
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Through the photographic lens, we can tell stories about how people treat the environment, such as human beings, landscapes, animals, and the nature in general. We tell stories about gaining more by giving.

So, think about it, what have you given to the environment?

-Abdullah Rashed
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“There are two basic motivating forces: fear and love. When we are afraid, we pull back from life. When we are in love, we open to all that life has to offer with passion, excitement, and acceptance. We need to learn to love ourselves first, in all our glory and our imperfections. If we cannot love ourselves, we cannot fully open to our ability to love others or our potential to create. Evolution and all hopes for a better world rest in the fearlessness and open-hearted vision of people who embrace life.”

- John Lennon
We’re all afraid, we just have to give everything a chance, even if our mind is telling us no because our heart doesn’t know better. But that gut feeling we get, this primitive urge to go and get what we desire is all we need sometimes, because nothing is certain and all we have is one chance to be someone. I wish I knew this before.

I came to SUNY Buffalo State nearly three years ago, and on our day of orientation, I remember being in a smaller group of photography majors eventually. Maybe less than 6 people. I was thinking of all the work I could make in the facilities here, how I would ignore digital processes I taught myself about, and continue to embrace the enigma that is the analog process and photography.

I still have much to learn, as well to teach anyone who will lend an ear.

Sitting in the photography room that I know oh so well, how there are still some push pins in the white wall, I signed up for Advanced Photography thinking that I’ll be making grand works of art, or maybe fumbling around in the darkroom some more. Upon learning the theme was centered around Buffalo and its waterways, as well as the environment, my mind started coming up with ideas and full of enthusiasm that if asked to put into a complete sentence, the most you’d get out of me is “Um, I was thinking that... Uh I don’t know, I can’t find the right words right now,” when really I’m trying to articulate this massive plan that I wouldn’t have the time to see through completely, but it’s another idea that I will write down along with countless others. I can’t speak for everyone, but when I walked down the street and see a little bit of trash, I’m not phased, but in actuality, I’m thinking why couldn’t that person wait 5 more minutes for a garbage bin or maybe find a better way to consume water, perhaps with a reusable container and a water filter (Fun fact: you’ll save more this way, as in less plastic and better tasting water, try lemon juice as well, trust me).

As a class, we’re trying to better understand our situation with the environment through people who are witnessing it firsthand. We are an extension of them and photography is our tool, our way of expressing interest in subjects that others might consider a waste of time. But is it really a waste of time to observe our prints of rundown buildings, pollution, issues of race (which is a cultural concept) and the inequality of wealth? How about photographs of riots, disasters, famine, and breakthroughs? Is it a waste to take time out of your life to make the future better not only for yourself but the ones you love and for the generations to come? Why must we be selfish in all that we do? I would love to believe that people care about others, but that’s hard to do when politicians don’t know what is even going on in their districts. Humans are a social creature, yet we spend so much time nowadays in our phones, oblivious to the tragedies in front of us.

I could perhaps write about my thoughts on the matter for hours, and by write I mean dictate, because the writing tool is a filter to what we really want to say.

If our work doesn’t evoke any emotional response or raise any questions, then all 16 of us have failed you as artists, as environmentalists, and as activists.
1) Why were you willing to work with Buffalo State Photography students on their collaborative project?

One of the Alliance for the Great Lakes’ main methods of protecting the Lakes is educating the public, whether in the formal setting of schools or through community outreach with the public at large. Personally, working with college students is one of my favorite parts of my job. College is a great time to learn about the world, explore the community you are in, and discover what you are passionate about. When I was in college, I took a mixture of environmental science and political science courses to try understand the challenges our society faced and what we could do about them. Working with the photography students gave me the opportunity to help show them how unique our local environment is and hopefully inspire them to become active in protecting it.

Another reason I was interested in working with the photography students was to explore different ways to depict our communities’ relationship with water and the environment visually. In the environmental advocacy field, effectively communicating complex issues, and the emotions connected to them, to the public and elected officials is crucial. One of the most powerful ways to communicate complex issues is through images. I was excited to see how the students interpreted the knowledge I shared with them and the experiences they had and then how they translated that into visual images.

2) What do you think students need to know about the Great Lakes and sustainability (or conservation)?

Any time I talk to students or any public group, I try to stress how unique and fragile the Great Lakes really are. For those of us that have lived in this region for many years, our communities have often taken them for granted. For the students that are new to Western New York, I hope they were able to see a new side of Buffalo that they might not have otherwise. I have brought many people from other region to the shores of Lake Erie and they have been surprised they couldn’t see the other side. Providing those eye opening experiences can leave a lasting impact on a person, especially when they are simultaneously learning about the challenges that are facing the Lakes. When you look out across the water, you don’t see countless microplastics, decades of industrial pollution, or a whole range of aquatic invasive species unless you know they are there. To complete that picture, it’s important for students to know how these issues are connected to our daily lives. The way we build our communities, the products we use, and many other decisions can impact the environment right in our own backyards. This isn’t meant to take away
from the global impact of these decisions and behaviors but I have found when people see the localized impact, it can leave a lasting impression. For example, when thinking about a disposable plastic items like bags or bottles, students might think about the fact that these items are made out of petroleum and are part of the global use of carbon that is contributing to climate change or they might remember when they did a beach cleanup and they found the shoreline littered with hundreds of pieces of plastic. Both of these reasons could cause someone to rethink their use of that product but the personal experience, and the images that come with that experience in this case, can be very powerful.

3) Why is it important for young people to pay attention to the state of their waterways?

In Western New York, our waterways have often been, at best, take for granted, and at worst, devastated through the decisions we have made as a community. The Great Lakes and their tributaries were central in the fight of the 20th century to stop unchecked industrial pollution that left many bodies of water severely degraded or even declared dead. Thanks to environmental protections and community activism, the Buffalo River and Lake Erie have made recoveries from that era but they are hardly safe from continued threats. Understanding this legacy of contamination and reclamation helps provide the context for evaluating our current relationship with water. Water is so ingrained in every aspect of our lives that it is not only important to understand how the way we build our communities and lead our daily lives impacts the health of our waterways but also how the health of our waterways impacts our daily lives. From safe drinking to creating sustainable communities and economies, if we continue to neglect our waterways, we are also threatening our wellbeing as individuals and as a society.
Community
That’s Enough

I believe that people in the Great Lakes area would usually like to have a peaceful, secure, healthy, and clean place to live.

They wish to have the freedom of breathing clean air and drinking fresh water. However, our environment and climate have been changing day after day, not always for the better.

The American public can express its views freely through the media and can work with advocacy groups and environmental organizations to raise awareness.

If they say their words loudly, they will get other people involved and engaged to be good citizens who represent the community and country.

Having a healthy life and green earth can make us preserve our wonderful planet for the next generations.

-Abdullah Rashed
Although these images in here aren’t representing the work of my current project, I have been assigned to shoot store fronts in Black Rock, Buffalo. My goal with this project is to show the difference in the neighborhoods due to neglect and or gentrification. This project also hits a soft spot for me because coming from New York City. Gentrification is widely known about yet it is an unspoken topic. So, with this project I will try to focus more on showing the highs and lows of the surrounding shopping environment/storefronts of my neighborhood which is full of abandoned buildings and new establishments on the same block.

- Richard Seepersad
Experimental
Photographers are their images and the materials that make them. When you look at a photograph, you view what it displays, and infer from thereon. These photographs are produced with care, from time and thought, from continuous growth and practice. The process of creating a photograph far exceeds the moment your mind takes to register what’s before you.

Water has played a pivotal role in the development of photography, every step of the way. The chemical mixtures diluted, developed and carried by it. Rinsing silver plates of daguerreotypes, or sensitized papers of “Talbotypes,” soaking of cyanotypes. Creating slides, kodachrome, developing cameras, computers, cell phones, your ability to exist. Water is life.

These images, after being exposed, were left to soak in tampered water solutions prior to being developed. By doing so, the layers of dye within the film bleed into each other, randomly altering the images. In this way, water moves from a passive participant in the creation of an image, to the forefront, dominating your viewership, for better or worse.

If these images are you, your life and existence, when tainted water enters, how do you think you will be altered? How have you been altered?

- carmen ml brown
I’d like to think that everyone cared about the Earth. I’d like to think that everyone worried that one day our Earth won’t be, because of us. I’d like to think that we are all trying our hardest to save this planet we live on. I know this to be wishful thinking. I know this to not be true. We live in a world where people are more obsessed with consuming then they are with preserving. We leave garbage on the sidewalk, we throw cigarettes on the ground, we do not care what the repercussion of our actions are. We just do. Never thinking about the after effect of the garbage getting blow into the water, or a bird thinking our cigarette is food. We just continue to consumer, until we can’t consume anymore. If the Earth is going to blow up anyway, what’s the point of us caring?

- Jessica Rohl
Man (video)
Nebulous
Marks
The Ungiving Tree
Danny Boy
You Are What You Leave series
You Are What You Leave series
Self Portrait
Tiny
River Dragon
Screaming Color
The Wind Blows
‘Scapes
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