

**Embracing the Wild: Experiential Narratives Finding Value in Nature**

**Tom Bowling  
Frostburg State University  
101 Braddock Road  
Frostburg, MD 21532  
301-687-4111**

**Final Report Submitted: May 31, 2016**

**Project Director: Kara Rogers Thomas  
Associate Professor of Sociology  
301-687-3124 or 240-522-7635  
krogersthomas@frostburg.edu**

Title of Project: Embracing the Wild: Experiential Narratives Finding Value in Nature

Grant Period: August 30, 2015 – May 31, 2016

Grantee Name: Frostburg State University

Project Director: Kara Rogers Thomas, Associate Professor of Sociology

**Description of Project:**

Frostburg State University students documented experiences of outdoor engagement in rural Allegany County, MD, and developed digital and stationary exhibits featuring this material. Students enrolled in SOCI 350: Folklore in Appalachia in Fall 2015 and SOCI 345: Sociology of the Environment in Spring 2016 partnered with the Allegany County based organization Home Ground to learn more about their activities in the region and document the experiences of its members.

Home Ground's mission is to increase knowledge of Allegany County's natural assets, inspiring citizens to support sustainable use and conservation of our land and water resources. That is especially important in western Maryland given that the county encompasses substantial forestland –with over 50% of the county's land area having slopes greater than 25%. Located in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed, it is critical to protect the area from erosion. Thus, opportunities for growth based development are limited. However, located only 2.5 hours from substantial population centers in the Baltimore-DC metro area, there exists tremendous potential for the expansion and development of sustainable outdoor recreational opportunities in the county.

Home Ground brings people together to enjoy the outdoors, and to appreciate the vital role of nature in our lives and communities. With an emphasis on “Sustaining Resources while Enriching Community,” the organization focuses on improving quality of life for Allegany County residents, by encouraging them to recognize and appreciate the value of the region's natural resources. Home Ground hosts a number of programs and events to achieve this aim. A relatively new organization, Home Ground currently

employs no staff and is wholly reliant on the work of volunteers to provide the following positions: event planners, event promoters, bloggers, and photographers.

From its inception, Home Ground has been concerned with valuing a diverse range of perspectives and experiences. Members come from a variety of backgrounds- common ground is found in their mutual respect for and appreciation of the region's natural resources and the recreational activities such resources offer. Currently, the organization's greatest needs include building a strong volunteer base and raising awareness of the organization's existence and efforts in Allegany County. This in turn, will lead to an increased awareness and recognition of the potential for the development of small businesses featuring environmentally sustainable recreational pursuits in western Maryland.

This teaching project was designed to assist the organization in expanding its audience and building a stronger volunteer base. The question, "Who is Home Ground?" became the project's jumping off point for FSU students, with increasing awareness of the organization's membership and activities in the region a primary goal. Starting in Fall 2015, FSU students worked with Home Ground members to document their outdoors experiences in rural Allegany County, MD, and develop digital and stationary exhibits featuring that material. Students attended several Home Ground events, met its members, and spent time with those members engaging in the types of activities that drew them to the organization.

In Spring 2016, students in "Sociology of the Environment," developed the material collected into an exhibit hosted by Mountain City Traditional Arts, a shop and venue located on Frostburg's Main Street, hosting a reception and presentation featuring the organization and the documented experiences. Students also participated in a Poster Session as part of Focus Frostburg, an FSU event focusing on issues of environmental and social sustainability. Working with these materials, students in both courses engaged in public discussions of entrepreneurship opportunities in Allegany County that

preserve and sustain the county's natural resources while enriching community and quality of life in the region.

## **Activities**

- September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015: Home Ground Founder, Donelle Keech and current President Christine Steinbrunner met with FSU students enrolled in "Folklore in Appalachia," to provide an overview of the organization and discuss its origin and purpose.
- September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015: Members of Home Ground participated in the FSU Appalachian Festival with an informational booth.
- September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2015: FSU students attended and documented Home Ground's Discover Allegany Outdoors Festival at Rocky Gap State Park
- October – FSU students attend Bird Watching Events and Hiking Events hosted by Home Ground
- October 22, 2015- FSU students attend and document Home Ground's Annual Membership Banquet, allowing them to provide more information about the project and meet individuals interested in participating.
- November, 2015- FSU students engaged in outdoor activities with twelve Home Ground members and documented those experiences, interviewing the individuals. Activities included hiking, kayaking, bird watching, sustainable farming, exploring Green Ridge State Forests, forest meditation, and photography.
- December 3-5, 2015- FSU students participated in the ARC Teaching Project's Annual Gathering in Washington, DC. This included both the oral presentation as well as the development of a poster presentation.
- February, 2016- FSU students enrolled in "Sociology of the Environment" met with Home Ground President Christine Steinbrunner and viewed the presentation students had given in DC in the Fall. This helped launch their work with the documented materials.

- March 9, 2016- FSU students hosted a public exhibit and reception featuring documented materials. Frostburg's new Farm to Table Restaurant, SHIFT, catered the event.
- March 18, 2016- FSU student, Shana Fischer, who participated in the project in Fall, 2015 attended the annual meeting of the Appalachian Studies Association to present the students' work as part of a panel, "Engaging the Appalachian Landscape: From Food to Forestry."
- April 20, 2016- FSU students presented a poster display on the project during Focus Frostburg, a campus event open to the community, which focuses on issues of environmental and social sustainability.

### **Project Outcomes:**

- Increase job opportunities and per capita income in Appalachia to reach parity with the nation- by learning about outdoor recreational opportunities and envisioning sustainable, nature-based entrepreneurship opportunities (ARC Goal) While FSU students are not going to achieve this over the course of two semesters, we believe this project did contribute to the successful development of a business plan to open Wholesome Harvest, a local foods and health store slated to open on Frostburg's Main Street in August 2016. The owner, Susan Snow is a former ARC Teaching Project Participant and she attended the Reception and Exhibit at Mountain City Traditional Arts, contributing to our discussion of entrepreneurship opportunities in the region.
- Students were engaged as active learners and participants in community projects
- Students engaged in active research to assist a local organization in increasing awareness and visibility of their efforts in the region
- Students developed leadership skills and awareness of community assets that can foster sustainability. It's interesting to note that one student who grew up in Cumberland, MD, had never visited the Green Ridge State Forest in his home County prior to this project. Participation in this project provided him a new appreciation for his home.
- Students conducted research to assist communities in creative approaches to sustainability through asset development. Aspects of these conversations came

out in the public reception and exhibit and in the poster display as part of Focus Frostburg.

- Participation in and presentation at the December Appalachian Teaching Project gathering in Washington, DC, December 2015.
- Development of poster documenting project- displayed at the DC Gathering, Mountain City Traditional Arts in March, and at FSU during Focus Frostburg in April.
- Participation the delivery of a formal presentation at the Appalachian Studies Association's Annual Conference in March 2016.
- Participation in public poster session and discussion during Frostburg State University's "Focus Frostburg" sustainability symposium.

### **Problems Encountered:**

As the Project Director, I worked closely with Home Ground's Board Members and President to initially plan the project in the Summer of 2015. Board members were confident that members would be delighted to volunteer for this documentation project. However, the Board relied on email notifications to initially invite participation and they wanted a strong list of potential participants before sharing that contact information with my class. While my students did attend and document Home Ground events in September and early October, it wasn't until the organization's Annual Membership Meeting and Banquet that they really began to make headway in recruiting participants. That being the case, the majority of the documentation work on this project took place in late October and early November- a time when the weather begins to interfere with outdoors activities. Scheduling became a challenge for students- so much so that I reduced the required number of interviews. Communication and scheduling was also challenging in the Spring semester – by the time the organization's President had the Board's approval for the date of the public exhibition and reception, we were only two weeks out, which negatively impacted our advertising. Fortunately, we were able to overcome these obstacles and produce a quality project.

### **Program Continuation and Sustainability:**

The public's awareness of the Home Ground Organization and its activities and events has increased over the course of the last year- due in large part to this project. In fact, this higher visibility has prompted the group to consider how best to approach a membership drive. Moreover, the organization is considering offering a combination of public and members only events. Prior to this point, all of Home Ground's events had been open to the public- which appears to have discouraged people from joining as paying members, thus limiting the organization's revenue. Finally, the project introduced FSU students to the value of the region's natural assets and provided them opportunities to consider the possibilities for economic development in the County which preserves the natural environment.