

Ted Whitesell
Interviewed by Shangrila Joshi
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FINAL

Joshi: Thank you for giving me this time to get to know some of your perspectives or your thoughts on working at Evergreen, what brought you here, and how you have seen Evergreen change over the years—over the decades, possibly. Maybe we can start with what brought you here.

Whitesell: What brought me here was a job description that I felt was exactly me. The only thing missing from the job description was my name. [laughing] It was an advertisement for somebody to teach political ecology at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. That's what I'd been working on in graduate school, and since then I was teaching at Michigan State University. I'd been there for six years in the Geography Department.

I'd had my eye on Evergreen ever since it was founded, even though I didn't think I was going to have a career in an academic profession. But it was pretty exciting when I heard about Evergreen, so when this announcement came out I was really excited that I might be able to do the kinds of things I wanted to do at an institution that I really wanted to be at.

Joshi: Would you mind saying why you were so excited about Evergreen? When had you heard about it and what had you heard about it?

Whitesell: I was part of a network of environmental activists in the '70s and '80s. We were aware—just by news that traveled through the grapevine—of the existence of Evergreen pretty soon after it started. The fact that it was very outdoor-oriented, environmental-oriented, very much an alternative to typical educational institutions. That all fit with the environmental activist network that I was part of, our understanding of the directions that cultures and institutions should be moving in in order to address the problems that we were interested in addressing. It seemed like it was really exciting, but it didn't really seem like a part of my future just because I didn't think that I had an academic future. [chuckles]

Joshi: But it worked out quite nicely.

Whitesell: It worked. I got into academia really in a backwards way. The only reason that I went to grad school was as a way to be able to learn and do some things that I wanted to do in Brazil, so it was a very short-term goal. It wasn't a stepping stone toward something else.

But then of course my dissertation was complete and I had to figure out what I was going to do next. The advisor at Berkeley, where I was getting my degree, he told me “If academic jobs might be in your future, it’s better to apply for them now, because it’s much easier to get an academic job from grad school than it would be to break back into academia if you’d left it for a while.”

That made sense, so I went ahead and went that route and I got a job at Michigan State University. That was a pretty standard university. It isn’t one of the best, but it isn’t one of the worst. It was very typical, and it was enough to teach me that I didn’t want to be a professor, and I didn’t want to work at a university, which has so many things wrong with it.

After I was teaching at Michigan State for nearly six years, Evergreen announced this job and I thought, wow. If I do want to be a professor, I couldn’t be a professor at any other place but Evergreen. That would allow me to do what I wanted to do. At Michigan State, teaching was my priority, and Evergreen is a teaching college, but it wasn’t the priority at Michigan State, which is typical of a big research university. The priority is publishing, getting grants, increasing the prestige of the university and all of those kinds of things, so as I got closer to having to apply for tenure, I was being advised to deemphasize the quality of my teaching. That was just completely unacceptable to me.

I was ready to bolt. I was going to just completely leave academia behind and go back to activism. It was only because this job opened and because I got it that I continue doing the work that I’m doing.

Joshi: You said that you were ready to go back to activism, and you also said earlier that Evergreen was also attractive because of your activist experience, and how you were thinking Evergreen might be a space in which that could possibly flourish. How has your experience been? Did you find that Evergreen was a place where that kind of work could flourish over the years?

Whitesell: Yes, because of the way I view education. There are professors who try to turn their students into activists and tell them what to think and what campaigns to participate in, and that’s not what I mean when I’m talking about this. When I was an activist, the thing that I found most important and most gratifying—and that I spent as much time as I could doing—was empowering people to realize their political power, and giving them the tools to be able to increase that power and use it effectively.

That’s the way I view education is it’s empowering students. They need to decide what their own political positions are, and what their own goals are, and where they want to take their lives. But I’m doing the same kinds of things with students in the classroom that I used to do with community organizing, to the extent that what I’m doing is helping people realize the power that’s inherent in them

if they understand the context that they're in and how to employ the tools that are available to them within that context.

Joshi: Would you say that Evergreen as an institution harbors a culture of the kind of activism that you're talking about, or are there other forms of activism that are encouraged or practiced that you think are not along the lines of how you approach activism?

Whitesell: I think there's so many professors at Evergreen that do. Maybe they don't use the term empowerment, but I see that that's what a lot of us are doing. It's a very student-centered institution. It's all about students finding the direction and taking the responsibility for their own education and realizing the potential that they have when they come to us so that we can make that blossom and deepen it.

Joshi: Would you say that throughout your time here, you've taught political ecology-oriented subjects? What other areas in geography? Is geography your discipline?

Whitesell: Yes. I got my undergraduate degree in environmental biology, which is basically ecology. It was called Environmental Biology by the University of Colorado in Boulder because at that time, activists were calling themselves the ecology movement. The Department of Biology wanted to differentiate themselves from that, so they switched from ecology to environmental biology. That's what I got my bachelor's in, and then I got my master's and PhD in geography, in human geography.

I've taught a variety of things at Evergreen, not just political ecology. I feel that introducing students to environmental studies is one of the most important things I've done, both at the graduate and the undergraduate levels. That involves me being able to use such a huge variety of different disciplines. For example, in the course I'm teaching right now, I'm teaching aspects of ecology, I'm teaching aspects of geography, I'm teaching aspects of behavioral sciences and political science, and I'm teaching demography and strategic thinking. I really don't see myself as being disciplinary at all.

Joshi: Being able to make contributions in Environmental Studies seems to have been a highlight of your time here. Could you speak a little bit to the ways in which Environmental Studies, as a field of study or an area of study or path of study has evolved over the years at Evergreen, and where you see it headed?

Whitesell: That's a really important topic. When I got here in the fall of '98, the environmental studies planning unit had a lot of people in it. I remember our meetings were always full of both social scientists and natural scientists. One thing I was struck by—because I think I had kind of a romantic idea of how things worked at Evergreen—was the lack of common understanding and common frame of reference between the natural and social scientists. I just blithely assumed that there would be this supra

disciplinary perspective that everyone would understand and work with across that boundary. That was the situation as I found it, but I was really excited to be working shoulder-to-shoulder with all kinds of different natural and social scientists from a wide variety of fields. It was thrilling.

Over the years, the environmental studies planning unit got smaller and it became much more just natural science with a little bit of social science. Planning units were disbanded more recently. So, I've seen a lot of changes and what you see in the curriculum now is really a lot less interdisciplinary than it used to be. We call it an environmental studies path now. Yet, if you look at the courses that are offered, the programs that are offered, we're mostly training students to be natural scientists. That's even going to get worse because I'm going to be retiring at the end of this year. Ralph Murphy is going to be retiring soon, I'm sure. We don't have the money to be able to hire a new social scientist like we need to.

I think there's less of a commitment within the environmental studies faculty to balance natural and social science. It needs to be balanced half and half in every program that we offer, except programs that are specifically designed for people who are not interested in environmental studies per se, but that are interested in getting an undergraduate degree that specializes in biology or ecology or hydrology or geology or something like that. There's nothing wrong with disciplinary degrees if that's what the students want. But if we're going to call it environmental studies, it needs to be evenly balanced and integrated with interdisciplinary teams.

Joshi: It sounds like it's functioning now more like an environmental science program.

Whitesell: That's right.

Joshi: It's called environmental studies and it does have a different meaning outside Evergreen. Do you think that the specific requirements that the BS degree warrants has created this kind of expectation?

Whitesell: I don't think I'd blame it on that. We've always had a BS option, at least ever since I've been here.

Joshi: Now we have the curricular area team structure that further siloes environmental studies within the sciences.

Whitesell: Right.

Joshi: Ideally, how would you see this evolving further to become more interdisciplinary?

Whitesell: It's going to take two things at least. One is a recognition and a commitment on the part of the faculty that we want to do things in a more interdisciplinary way, and that may not happen. It's up to

the current faculty to decide what they want, and I'm receding into the background, and in the minority anyway. If that's not what they want, then it's not going to happen. But if it were to be what they wanted, that would be one precondition, to make that commitment. The other would be for our financial situation to improve enough that we could hire at least half a dozen more social scientists dedicated to teaching in interdisciplinary environmental studies teams.

Joshi: You said something about your work in Brazil. I'm excited to hear about that, so what work did you do in Brazil, and was that part of your dissertation?

Whitesell: My interest in Brazil goes way back to when I was a child. We had a foreign exchange student from Brazil live with our family for a little while when I was probably in grade school. We all really loved him, and I've kept my eye out on Brazilian culture and music and things like that ever since then. I loved to travel when I was younger. I spent a lot of time traveling around Latin America and I just fell in love with Brazil.

When I went to graduate school, what I really wanted to do was learn about and participate in efforts that Brazilians were undertaking to protect the Amazon rainforest because that was the big fad in the 1980s, Save the Rainforest. So I went down there after my first year at Berkeley in the master's program, and I got a reconnaissance grant from the Center for Latin American Studies. It was the joint Stanford-Berkeley center and they had this great opportunity for grad students where they would just give you money to go find a research topic.

So, I went to Brazil, thinking that what I would do was work on issues having to do with forest management because I had a lot of experience with that in the United States. As an activist, I know a lot about national forest policies and silvicultural practices and things like that.

I started traveling around Brazil and meeting with people in the Brazilian agencies that had to do with forest management, and some of the non-profits that were looking at issues like that. I quickly realized that there really wasn't a big gap or a big unfulfilled niche that I could jump into. That didn't seem very satisfying.

I guess the turning point was when I met a Brazilian anthropologist who had been working a lot with the rubber tappers in the state of Acre in western Brazilian Amazonia. Her name is Mary Allegretti. She was from the south of Brazil, but she'd spent a lot of time working with the nascent rubber tappers' movement in Acre. We had a really great meeting. She put a lot of great ideas in my head about things that I could do.

I learned at that point about the unique role—it's not unique in Latin America but it's different

from here—that academics have with social movements. Social movements incorporate academics as advisors in ways that reserve the academic contribution to listening carefully and coming up with thoughtful suggestions, but not exercising any kind of control or decision-making authority. I really respected that phenomenon, and that's what Mary Allegretti was doing as well. I was thinking, that's a role that I would feel comfortable playing.

I ended up meeting then for the rest of the summer that I was down there after my first year of college, I made it a point to try to meet with people who were involved with social movements that I might want to get involved with in that role. I wasn't asking, "Hey, would you take me on?" But I was just asking them, "What are you doing?" And getting to know people on an individual basis as well as getting to know the organizations.

That's how I found a particular place in the Amazon with a particular set of actors that I felt would be a really great opportunity for me to learn what I wanted to learn, and for me to make a contribution to what they were trying to do. That's what I did for my master's thesis and for my PhD. I was basically working with the same people in the same area.

Joshi: Since obtaining your PhD and since you have been starting to teach, has that work returned into your teaching in any way, or have you revisited in person and/or in terms of bringing that material into your teaching in the classrooms?

Whitesell: I definitely use that in the classrooms, but it's getting extremely dated now and I haven't kept up with that research. I was keeping up with the research when I was at Michigan State, but there were a number of things that got in the way of that. First of all, I started having kids and raising children. Second of all, I was working at an institution—Evergreen—where it was a lot harder to be able to fit research and get research grants to travel to Brazil all the time. Third, I didn't want to fly around anymore because of climate change. I continually use that research in my teaching and I update the data that I'm giving to students, grounded in my personal stories and slides, but I haven't kept up with the research. I stayed in contact with people who are doing that kind of work, so I'm able to tell students what current events are like.

Joshi: That's what I was really trying to get at as well. How does that work become present in your teaching? Because a couple of people I've talked to over the years—just yesterday I met with Therese Saliba at an event—and talking about our meeting today, she was telling me about how when she taught with you, your work in Brazil was really present in your teaching. I was thinking of that as a way in which your Brazil experience comes into the teaching. Another person I've talked with who has also taught

with you—Erin Martin—has over the years spoken really highly of the way in which you teach, in a way that utilizes storytelling. It sounded like the work that you've done in Brazil comes into play in your teaching, making it possible for students here to understand a more global perspective.

Whitesell: Absolutely. There are so many ways in which I can tell stories based on those experiences that address very common teaching objectives. For example, one of the things that I always work into my environmental studies classes is human population, because there's so many misconceptions in the population at large and in our student body, and even in our faculty about human population. I did survey research in the place in Brazil where I was working, and among the wide variety of topics that we covered in the surveys—we were doing some demographics having to do with family size and preferred family size—the heads of household were always identified to us as male. I would ask the male heads of household questions, but I also had a female research assistant—who was from the Amazon region, although not that particular region—ask the females in the family—the mothers—the same questions.

We would find that even though the males wanted to have very large families—typically six to nine children—the females gave answers that were completely unexpected based upon the research that had been done to date. In population geography and demography, the general idea was that as the demographic transition progresses and women have more opportunities in their lives and better opportunities for healthcare, they will want to have fewer babies and fertility will decline. What we found was that in one of the most poverty-stricken areas of the world—this was a really difficult place to live, these people were suffering from a lot of disadvantages—and it was rural, so it didn't conform to any of the aspects of the demographic transition that are supposed to lead to lower desired family sizes—the women all wanted very small families, two to three children, which was completely different from what the research told you women would want. That revealed, of course, this big power dynamic within the family. The people who had the power to make decisions about family size were the men.

I can tell that story as a way to illustrate a general principle about the importance of looking at the household scale of analysis, and to pay attention to gender dynamics. That's a very general, across-the-board lesson that you would want students to understand if they wanted to understand things about social science or about demography. That experience gave me the opportunity to tell that story. There's lots of other things that I can do, but that's just an illustration.

Joshi: That sounds very interesting. From what you said, it sounds like neo Malthusian ideas are somewhat prevalent.

Whitesell: Absolutely.

Joshi: And here as well.

Whitesell: Well, yeah. It varies from person to person, but I think there's just a general ignorance—not in a pejorative sense—of population dynamics.

Joshi: It sounds like Evergreen is a place where, with interdivisional or interdisciplinary teaching in subjects such as environmental studies, this would be the perfect place in which to work against that kind of ignorance.

Whitesell: Absolutely.

Joshi: Neo Malthusian ideas and ideas critical of those could be taught together.

Whitesell: And it's really our responsibility to do that because the textbooks that we use, from biology and even geology, all present neo Malthusian views. I'm teaching my Introduction to Environmental Studies with Ken Tabbutt this year. He is a geologist and we're using a book called *Environmental Geology*. In the very first chapter they talk about human population, which was pretty unexpected for me.

Joshi: New book?

Whitesell: It's a book that's been used a lot, so it's gone through a lot of different editions. It's continually revised every year. The information they provided wasn't inaccurate, it was just incomplete. It's a true statement that human population is growing rapidly, that we have more than seven billion people now, and that projections are it will maybe reach 11 billion by the end of the century. That's true, but it scares the daylights out of people, and the conclusion that people reach is therefore, we need to force people to have fewer babies, when in fact, fertility has been declining since the 1960s. They didn't include that information in the textbook. So, all of the unspoken truths about what's really going on can be very damaging and lead to unethical and counterproductive policy recommendations or conclusions. So yeah, it is a problem.

Joshi: This just goes on to illustrate exactly why you were arguing earlier about why environmental studies needs to be interdisciplinary.

Whitesell: That's right. Ken is a really smart guy and he may have understood this. We're using another textbook called *Humans in the Landscape: An Introduction to Environmental Studies*. It's mostly social science, and they organize the book around what they call the "grand challenges." So climate change is a grand challenge, sustainability / sustainable development is a grand challenge, and the biodiversity crisis is a grand challenge, things like that. But population isn't a grand challenge, and so Ken remarked to me after we went through that part of the book, "That's interesting. Now I understand why the authors said

that population isn't a grand challenge." It illustrates the fact that I think we start with the "common knowledge"—which is basically very neo Malthusian—and we need to disabuse people of that, both students and faculty.

Joshi: We were talking about your teaching. You've taught in the environmental studies area with various people, including Ken Tabbutt and others. How do you tend to approach team teaching, particularly in the environmental studies area? Have you found it easy and/or has your teaching style evolved over the years in terms of integration? How have you approached it, and how would you advise newer people to approach integrated team teaching, which is not as easy as it sounds?

Whitesell: It's hard work to teach by yourself, as you were saying earlier. [laughter] There's hard work involved with both things. One of the things that I love about Evergreen is team teaching. I'm always learning new things, both in terms of the content and in terms of how to teach. Even though I'm going to be retiring at the end of this year, I still know that I could continue learning how to teach. No matter who I work with, I'm always learning something from them about what I could do different or what I could do better.

How do I approach team teaching? Starting with just brainstorming with people about what we want to teach and how we want to teach it. If you're working with somebody who has already taught a lot, "How do you like to generally do this? How do you generally like to do that?" Just sharing methods.

Sometimes what I do is recommend things that I feel work really well, but more often than not, I think what I do is try out new things that I haven't done. When someone says, "This is the way I usually teach it," I usually say, "Let's go for it because it sounds really cool. I've never tried that before." After that experience, I make up my mind whether I want to keep doing that or not, or whether I want to do some modified version of that. I look on team teaching as a real learning experience, and it's an opportunity for me. In my teams, we always tried to strike a good balance, where the students are being evenly exposed to the things that each of us has to offer.

Joshi: Did you usually have fieldtrips in the programs you've taught?

Whitesell: Yeah, students love fieldtrips.

Joshi: Are there particular fieldtrips that you keep returning to because they're particularly rewarding or rich experiences?

Whitesell: It depends on the program. I've taught a summer program for the last six years called Environmental Challenges and Solutions. We have a lot of fieldtrips that I keep repeating in that. One of the things I try to do is reduce our greenhouse gas emissions by not using vans as much as possible. We

do have a fieldtrip that I do in the summers to Mount Rainier that includes a van, and one to some of the South Sound prairies that requires a van. But I do a lot of fieldtrips throughout the campus and downtown Olympia.

Joshi: Do you take the bus?

Whitesell: Yeah, I tell the students, “Hop on a bus and I’ll meet you downtown.” If they want to drive, they can drive themselves. There are things like Capitol Lake and all the issues around Budd Inlet and the port and the wastewater treatment plant. Sea level rise. All of those are things you can do downtown.

The most popular one in the summer is when we go out to Boston Harbor and look at marine organisms at night by putting lights in the water off the dock.

Joshi: I’ve never heard of it.

Whitesell: It’s really fun. It’s not a marine biology class because I’m not a marine biologist. It’s a way to connect what we talk about when we talk about marine issues with what’s all around them but invisible. Unless they’re taking marine biology or unless they are scuba divers or something, the marine environment is something that they completely miss. All they see is the surface of it, just the water. There is so much going on out there, and they get so excited about it too, all these little creatures that are swimming around in the water or glommed onto the pier. That’s probably the most exciting one for them.

This fall we went to Mount Rainier, and we went to Eastern Washington, stayed at Dry Falls, and we went to Ruby Beach. All the students really loved Ruby Beach. That was their favorite. We had a beautiful day, too.

Joshi: Do you have multiple overnight fieldtrips?

Whitesell: Yes, the one to Eastern Washington was four days. We saw the Wild Horse Wind and Solar Facility that Puget Sound Energy has, close to Vantage near the Columbia River. We stayed at Sun Lakes by Dry Falls in the Grand Coulee, and then we went up to Grand Coulee Dam. We saw the dam and heard the tour guide’s version of what happened, and then we went to the Colville Tribe’s museum and heard a very different perspective on what happened with the Grand Coulee Dam. The students were really impressed by that contrast. We were going to try to work a tour into Hanford into that, but they weren’t offering tours at that point.

That was a great experience for students. That was the first fieldtrip we did, and they were able to get to know each other. That’s one of the great things that fieldtrips do is they really solidify that

learning community and help people feel more relaxed about working with everybody else. It was also beautiful.

Joshi: Do people make their own food? Did people cook and prepare food?

Whitesell: Yeah. This is another thing I've been interested in experimenting with when I teach with different faculty teams. Different faculty have different preferences for how they handle that. At this facility, there was an environmental learning center that the state provides, so it's got a big industrial kitchen and a giant eating area with all the facilities that you need. We went to the grocery store, and students were assigned teams to cook particular meals and have particular menus. It worked out really well. We had some students who were really good cooks. It was actually very successful.

Joshi: I've mostly enjoyed the meals at those fieldtrips where students were given responsibilities to prepare menus. Have you ever done the 101 loop fieldtrips, staying at the ONRC in Forks and such?

Whitesell: No, I've never made a fieldtrip out of the whole loop, just different parts of it.

Joshi: And I've only done that in a series of programs. I've never done the Eastern Washington options, so when you're talking about different perspectives on what happened to the dam, I'm really intrigued and I'd like to explore them myself.

Whitesell: One really successful fieldtrip I did in the past in Eastern Washington was to the Spokane Indian Reservation. My stepdaughter, Bree Oatman, was teaching science at the high school on the Spokane Reservation, so I put together a program that dealt with environmental justice issues having to do with mines and Native Americans. Partly what we looked at was the classic case of uranium and the Navajo.

We also looked at the decommissioned uranium mine that's on the Spokane Reservation. It's called the Midnite Mine. My students were learning about that here, and her students were learning about it there, and, of course, they lived with the situation. Then we took a fieldtrip out there, and her high school science students from the reservation and my students from Evergreen got together on the fieldtrip and visited the mine together and talked to some of the professionals that were working on it. We had different projects that the students did. That was a really exciting fieldtrip.

Joshi: What kinds of projects did students do?

Whitesell: Just basically coming up with information that they could present to each other. It's a serious issue. Even though the mine is decommissioned, they used the tailings from the mine to pave the roads on the reservation.

Joshi: Do they still do that?

Whitesell: The roads have the radioactive waste products already.

Joshi: Are there ongoing health issues that come out of it?

Whitesell: I haven't kept up with this so I can't give you an up-to-date answer, but there were a number of ongoing studies.

Joshi: I'm aware that you have engaged your students in a book project. I'm wondering how that came about, and if these sorts of student projects in your teaching, fieldtrips and other—I'm curious to hear from what context the idea and/or the project arose of involving students in an edited volume. I think one of the books was *Defending Wild Washington*.

Whitesell: Right.

Joshi: Another was *Changing Courses*.

Whitesell: No, that wasn't a student book. That was my dissertation. I've only done one student book.