

The Walden Climate-Change Collaborative: Fostering Place-Based Environmental Stewardship



Inspired by Henry David Thoreau's contributions to environmental thought, the Walden Climate-Change Collaborative (WCCC) was formed in 2011 to bring UMass Lowell faculty, environmental activists, and other concerned citizens together to advance climate literacy across our region. In 2012, partnering with the Thoreau Society and the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), we won a seed grant from UMass to create a virtual "classroom in the woods," a digital platform that features place-based pages that show how climate change is affecting historic landscapes and public lands throughout New England. This year, we are seeking grant funding to stage climate-literacy workshops at the many state parks and heritage areas that will be included on our web site. Led by faculty and external experts involved in UMass Lowell's Climate Change Initiative (CCI), these workshops will utilize our virtual classroom to train DCR staff, friends groups, Thoreau Society members, college students, and community activists to educate park visitors about the impacts of climate change on local heritage areas, nature preserves, and urban ecosystems. To maximize public awareness of our project, we will begin at Walden Pond, the place where Thoreau first defined environmental stewardship as an American ideal.

Launching our climate-change workshops at Walden will help us reach the vast audience that Thoreau still inspires to ask vital questions about our responsibilities to nature, our neighbors, and ourselves. Meanwhile, marshaling scientific data on the many other places that he wrote into American history, from Provincetown to Mt. Greylock, from the Berkshires to Boston Harbor, will help us recruit people who are already committed to preserving these public treasures into our workshops. By pairing Thoreau's observations with accessible scientific research and high-impact images and documents, we aim to empower workshop participants to remind visitors that we must preserve what remains of our natural heritage, not merely for our own enjoyment, but as an ethical duty. Indeed, as environmentalist Wen Stephenson noted in an Op-Ed in the *Boston Globe*, "If slavery was the human, moral crisis of Thoreau's time, then global warming—and its impact on countless innocent lives, starting with the poorest and most vulnerable, far and near—is the human, moral crisis of our own" ("Why Walden Matters Now," *Boston Globe*, September 22, 2011).



WALDEN POND STATE RESERVATION



Our alliance with the DCR, a public agency that manages forests, watersheds, seashores, and other significant sites, and the Thoreau Society, an educational non-profit with members in all fifty states, presents a model that can be replicated across the country. Like similar agencies in other states, the DCR works with friends groups at many of its properties, including the Friends of Walden Pond, a subgroup within the Thoreau Society. In setting up climate-change workshops at DCR sites, the WCCC will build on existing partnerships between the state agency that oversees public parks and the friends groups that are committed to their preservation. We will also tap into the Thoreau Society's regional and national network of scholars, educators, students, and environmentalists. Providing these dedicated volunteers with tools to teach climate literacy on a local level will enable them to promote environmental stewardship long into the future. In New England, we will foster this outcome by advertising and archiving the climate-literacy activities of workshop graduates on the websites of the WCCC, the DCR, UMass Lowell, and the Thoreau Society. Then, drawing from our Massachusetts experience, we will work with Thoreau Society members, friends groups, government agencies, educators, and environmental organizations in other states to help create place-based climate-literacy programs in other regions.



THE FRIENDS OF
WALDEN POND