

Introduction

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*When we see land as a community to which we belong,
we may begin to use it with love and respect.*

—Aldo Leopold

This book is about the “community to which we belong”—we, the students, faculty and staff of Cal Poly University and our neighbors.

Cal Poly Land encompasses nearly 10,000 acres in four large parcels—two in San Luis Obispo county, and two in Santa Cruz county—making us the second largest university landholder in California and one of the largest in the nation. This land comprises one of Poly's most valuable assets. Its “outdoor teaching and learning facilities” provide laboratories for education and research, house ecosystems and lifeforms, grow food and fiber, inspire recreation and renewal, and remain our legacy from past to future generations. Cal Poly's land has been central to its evolving identity. Enjoying, knowing, using, and taking care of this land are our common concerns. These particular 10,000 acres sustain our work and define our institution.

This book aims to increase appreciation and understanding of the land, to enhance our sense of place. At a 1989 conference on the Cal Poly campus, the eminent cultural geographer, Yi-fu Tuan, articulated the value of that sense:

Place supports the human need to belong to a meaningful and reasonably stable world, and it does so at different levels of consciousness, from an almost organic sense of identity that is an effect of habituation, to a more conscious awareness of the values of middle scale places such as neighborhood, city and landscape, to an intellectual appreciation of the planet earth itself as home.

Despite this basic human need, many students graduate from the University never having walked up Poly Canyon and unable to distinguish Coast Live Oak from Poison Oak. Not only does such alienation from their surroundings impoverish them emotionally and intellectually, it also renders them incapable of responding to the growing environmental crisis immediately before us.

How will Cal Poly itself face that crisis? The University has recently addressed the pressures of population growth and the conflicting demands for development and conservation by initiating an ongoing process of land-use planning. In the words of the Master Plan, that process “depends on an improved and expanded understanding of these valuable assets as a basis for its recommendations.”

Learning about our land leads to what Aldo Leopold called “a land ethic”: “The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants and animals, or collectively: the land.” Half a century ago, Leopold observed that “Perhaps the most serious obstacle impeding the evolution of a land ethic is the fact that our educational and economic system is headed away from, rather than toward, an intense consciousness of land.” The authors of *Cal Poly Land: A Field Guide* – faculty, staff and students – offer it to help shift the direction of this educational community, heading it toward rather than away from a land ethic of our own.

This book is one of several products of the Cal Poly Land Project, an interdisciplinary faculty seminar established in Spring 2000 by Provost Paul Zingg as part of the University's Centennial celebration to illuminate “How different disciplinary lenses inform our understanding of a particular issue or topic.” The Project attempts to integrate a somewhat fragmented university community by adopting the methods of “Place Study,” which link remote academic disciplines and cross barriers between nature and culture, knowledge and feeling, theory and practice.

The concreteness of a topic defined by place and centered on the natural environment complements Cal Poly's enthusiastic engagement with the “virtual reality” of computer technology. Tools like GIS and three-dimensional-modeling enhance knowledge and control of the material world, but walking a watershed or sitting in an oak grove can teach some things inaccessible through a monitor. The Cal Poly Land Project balances teaching of computer literacy with environmental literacy.

The Centennial Seminar enlisted the University Architect and 19 faculty members from 15 departments and three Colleges to meet in a monthly class and teach one other about various aspects of Cal Poly Land.

Some made presentations, some led field trips, one took photographs, and one designed this book. Several invited their own students to attend seminar meetings or hired them as project assistants.

Beginning in Spring 2002, Cal Poly Land is the subject of a course developed by members the faculty seminar. Interdisciplinary and team-taught, the course includes weekly classroom presentations, discussions, and hikes. Subtitled, “Nature, Technology and Society,” the course occupies a critical position in a Polytechnic University.

During its first year of operation, the Cal Poly Land Seminar produced an extensive website, <<http://polyland.lib.calpoly.edu>>. This website displays, updates and archives the material produced by seminar members. It catalogues the growing repository of research studies concerning Cal Poly Land stored in the Robert E. Kennedy Library, and it includes full-text digital versions of some of the most widely applicable ones.

This Field Guide is the third project of the Cal Poly Land Seminar. A tribute to the community to which we belong, the book is also its product. Many members of this community have donated their expertise, talent, time, and effort to its creation. In addition to the dozens of student, faculty and staff contributors whose names are listed in the text and in the credits at the end of the book, special recognition goes to:

Brian McGlynn, principal book design and production assistant; Patrick Concepcion, chief illustrator; Anna Chaffin, image processor; Melody Demerit, copy editor.

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Most of the material in this book is primary—based on original research and observation by the authors, who are authorities in their own fields. When other authorities have been consulted or cited, references appear in endnotes.