Institute for Environmental Studies

Growing more than plants

By Renee Harmon

Concerns about conservation and climate change, sustainable energies and stewardship of resources are increasing, but with new attention comes not just escalating anxiety but rising enrollment in a special WIU program that could help.

The College of Arts and Sciences' Institute for Environmental Studies (IES) offers students from many disciplines valuable knowledge and career options. The Institute is seeing incredible growth, helped by the leadership of its director, Roger Viadero.

Viadero, a professor of biology and also the president of the national Aquacultural Engineering Society, has been with the department since last year. He says IES has a lot to offer students, with many opportunities.

IES is "a focal point for multidisciplinary scholarship research," he says, adding that his job and the institute's goal is to "create opportunities and put groups together.

"The opportunities are endless," says Viadero. "Skills learned from IES build focus, broaden appeal and are noticed by employers."

Photo by Visual Production Center

Viadero looks over some of the East Lamoine River property recently donated to WIU for use by environmental-science students and other scholars.

Students from IES go on to find careers in a variety of fields including scientists, engineers, city planners, policy makers, fund raisers and community organizers.

WIU offers a minor in Environmental Studies, attracting students from fields inside and outside the sciences, including English, community health, education, journalism and even the Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Administration.

Viadero is musing about expanding IES's offerings, anticipating and meeting students' needs.

IES's faculty also is excited about program progress – including a recent addition to the WIU campus. WIU received a donation of 77 acres of land located on West Adams Street about 2.5 miles from campus, from Rodney and Bertha Fink, establishing the Rodney and Bertha Fink Environmental Studies Field Laboratory and Conservancy. This land will allow students to research plant and animal life without having to leave the county.

"Now if a professor wants to show his or her students something, they don't have to drive 45 minutes each way to the Kibbe Life Science Research Station [on the Mississippi River]," Viadero says. The Fink property has about one-half mile of East Lamoine River frontage and the land is protected under three U.S. Department of Agriculture conservancy agreements.

"And if students from other departments want to use the land, they can," he adds. "If an art student wants to sit and paint a picture by a tree, they can."

IES also is working with the federal and state governments, plus other groups including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Rock Island District, the U.S. Coast Guard and other stakeholders to create a lasting partnership that can create even more growth and opportunities.

Photo by Robert Johnson

Roger Viadero sees IES as a place where various disciplines intersect.

"One of the best aspects to the institute is being new," Viadero explains. "Nothing is set in stone yet so we can offer students the opportunity to get into the ground level of something that is growing. The flexibility is good, the teaching is high quality, the student-teacher relationships are strong with great personal attention, and many of the field biologists in the program are very well known and have good reputations."

The environment is increasingly and more obviously important to civilization, so new energy in a fresh program helps keep it strong and vital. Viadero says he's pleased with the help and support he's getting from the College of Arts and Sciences and the University at large, and sees a lot of great things in the future – along with a lot of well-prepared students coming out of IES ready to take on the challenges of the planet.

Harmon is a senior journalism major from Keokuk, Iowa.