



Using Religion and Ethics to Restore ‘This Old Earth’



Whether old houses, furniture, cars, or even ourselves, the fact is: humans love to restore things.

For **Gretel Van Wieren**, Assistant Professor in the Department of Religious Studies, it begged the question: “Why not the environment?”

In response, Van Wieren developed and teaches an IAH (Center for

Integrative Studies in Arts and Humanities) seminar course – Human Culture, Ethics, and Nature – an Introduction to Environmental Ethics. It is a multipronged approach to environmental ethics, religion, and restoration of the environment. Coursework blends the philosophical with the scientific and the spiritual with the moral, and focuses on community organizing work to shape concrete practices that restore damaged landscapes.

“Providing a comparative worldview, the seminar introduces the work of modern, spiritual, and ethical writers as well as new coursework in religious studies,” Van Wieren said.

Her Environmental Ethics seminar was not Van Wieren’s first direct exposure to the subject. Her 2013 book, *Restored to Earth*, provided the first comprehensive examination of the religious and ethical dimensions and significance of contemporary restoration practice. This resulted in an ethical framework to advance the field of environmental ethics in a more positive, action-oriented, experience-based direction.

In the book, Van Wieren brings together insights and examples from restoration ecology, environmental ethics, religious studies, and conservation and Christian thought,

as well as her own personal experiences in ecological restoration, to propose a new restoration ethic grounded in the concrete, hands-on experience of humans working as partners with the land.

“Dr. Van Wieren’s work exemplifies the land-grant interdisciplinarity that MSU has been encouraging,” said Arthur Versluis, Chair of the Department of Religious Studies. “Her work involves many areas and departments across the University including Agriculture, Forestry, Environmental Philosophy, and others.”

Van Wieren’s Religion and the Environment course is popular among students in the Department of Religious Studies’ Nonprofit Leadership concentration, and provides a viable career track for students, as well as an introduction to her and others’ work. It covers work related to for-profits, too.

Besides class sessions, students learn about and visit a number of course-related entities such as university-wide environmental efforts at Michigan State. They also learn from guest key nonprofit leaders, including those from FoodPLUS|Detroit, a networked innovation coalition established to facilitate and accelerate implementation of innovative food, agriculture, and related resources projects.

“There is a definite difference between students now and when I began teaching at MSU six years ago,” Van Wieren said. “And while those in my environment courses still include a handful of climate change deniers and others who are dismissive of the environmental movement, I’ve seen a positive shift in awareness and support for efforts to restore the environment. In fact, I was very pleased with the students’ final project this term. It was a major research paper, and their presentations were stellar.”