

OU celebrates Earth Week

By Stephanie Laird
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Earth Week 2008, a 10-day program beginning this past Saturday and culminating in the nationally celebrated Earth Day Tuesday, April 22, will feature speakers, workshops and projects addressing the critical environmental issues facing our planet, with a focus on the topic of environmental justice.

“Environmental injustice is the condition of having to bear environmental ills disproportionately because of your economic or social disadvantage as a community,” said Sonia Marcus, sustainability coordinator at Ohio University.

When she began the position last year, Marcus said she wanted to expand the traditional Earth Day celebration and environmental activities associated with it into a 10-day program, she said, a philosophy that’s encapsulated in year’s plan.

Last year, the topic was climate change; each year the topic is highlighted through the various speakers and events hosted throughout the week. This year’s focus on issues pertaining to environmental justice – with a sub-theme on environmental reporting – is a serious issue in Appalachia due to intensive coal-mining in the region and its associated ramifications, including acid mine drainage, according to Marcus. “The historic and present dependency on coal resource extraction in this region of the country puts Appalachia at a disadvantage both economically and environmentally, adding insult to injury, because we have to bear the burdens associated with coal mining at all stages of the coal extraction, production and use cycle.”

Appalachia is a victim of environment injustices, and subsequently environmental racism, because of our rural and economic status, Marcus continued.

“We have certain environmental ills we’re dealing with in this country, and individual communities both in rural and city settings are disadvantaged and further burdened by environmental ills,” she said.

Who’s suffering disproportionately depends on where you are and what environmental burdens you’re dealing with, she added.

With the mobilization and support from a variety of university departments, offices and organizations who are co-sponsoring the event, with the OU Office of Sustainability acting as the headquarters coordinating the information and events of Earth Week, high-profile keynote speakers are participating this year. They include Erik Reece, author of “Lost Mountain: A Year in the Vanishing Wilderness,” and Jeff Goodell, author of “Big Coal: The Dirty Secret Behind America’s Energy Future.”

Reece, a native of Kentucky, wrote in “Lost Mountain,” his debut book, on the effects of mountaintop-removal coal mining in Eastern Kentucky. His essay “Death of a Mountain” appeared in the April 2005 Harper’s, and Reece earned the John B. Oakes Award for Distinguished Environmental Journalism from the Columbia University School of Journalism. He is speaking this evening at 8 in Walter Hall room 145.

Also featured during this week’s awareness activities is Goodell, an author of several books, contributing editor at Rolling Stone, and a journalist whose articles are regularly featured in Wired, The New Republic and The New York Times Magazine, where his most recent feature focused on the emerging field of carbon-emissions trading. In “Big Coal,” Goodell’s most recent book, he debunks assumptions underlying the retrieval of coal and the notion of coal as cheap energy. He will speak Wednesday at 7 p.m. in the Scripps Hall Auditorium.

Other activities featured during this Earth Week celebration include: free lunches and guided tours at the OHIO

Ecohouse on Dairy Lane; a community panel discussion, “Legal and Policy Dimensions of Environmental Justice,” which will include several environmental community activists and policy makers who will talk about the legal and political means of addressing environmental issues (Thursday at 7 p.m. in Bentley room 132); a live Web cast of “Chill Out!” on practical solutions universities are implementing across the country to reduce their global warming impact; and a roundtable discussion on environmental justice with opening remarks by students in the Environmental Studies program (Tuesday, April 22 at 7 p.m. in Bentley room 135).

Marcus said she’s looking forward to this Earth Week because she enjoys the opportunity to collaborate with people from various parts of campus. It’s interesting to see what a group of intelligent and highly motivated people can come up with, she said. “Earth Week,” she explained, “provides a rich and interesting program for people at different levels of knowledge on the issues involved.

“We want to keep challenging people’s knowledge about sustainability and the environment. We want to keep complicating these questions by adding complexity, not confusion, because if you think you have it figured out, then something is wrong,” said Marcus.

While Marcus enjoys the attention brought to the most critical issues facing our planet environmentally during Earth Week, she said she hopes it gives people information on integrating sustainable living and environmental ideals into their lifestyles, not just during the event, but to provide the momentum to continue this manner of thinking for the rest of the year.

Co-sponsors for Earth Week 2008 include: the master’s program in Environmental Studies; the E.W. Scripps School of Journalism, the Department of Geography, the Department of Political Science, Honors Tutorial College, University College, the Student Activities Commission, Sierra Student Coalition, the Sustainable Living Organization and the Green Network.

For additional information on Earth Week 2008 and a complete schedule of events visit:
www.facilities.ohiou.edu/conservation/earthweek.htm.