FACILITATING TRANSFORMATIONS: BRINGING ASTROBIOLOGY TO INCARCERATED POPULATIONS. D. Scalice[1], N. Nadkarni[2,4,5], K. Bush[3,4], J. Trivett[3,4], [1]NASA Astrobiology Program, [2]University of Utah, [3]The Evergreen State College, [4]Sustainability in Prisons Project (SPP) Network, [5]Initiative to Bring Science Programs to the Incarcerated (INSPIRE).

Men and women incarcerated in state prisons are one of the most scientifically underserved and ethnically diverse groups in the US. Over 2.3 million individuals are in prisons, where they have almost no access to academic education. Correctional education tends to be vocational or GED-focused, even though many inmates have the capability, desire, and time to learn about academic subjects such as science. A recent meta-analysis by the Bureau of Justice Administration shows that correctional education can reduce the probability of recidivism by 13% [1].

We seek to provide access to science for non-traditional learners in non-traditional learning environments and places where there is powerful potential for transformation. The NASA Astrobiology Program is partnered with the Sustainability in Prisons Project (SPP), located at the Evergreen State College and all Washington State prisons, and its sister program, the Initiative to Bring Science Programs to the Incarcerated (INSPIRE), located at the University of Utah, which have been providing scientific programming to incarcerated populations since 2003. Their seminal work has demonstrated positive impacts on inmates' behavior, attitudes, content learning, and self-perception as science learners. More than 50 prisons in nine states belong to the SPP Network: http://network.sustainabilityinprisons.org

SPP's initial activities brought sustainable operations, such as composting and working with native plants into prisons and jails—environments that are sterile, nature-deprived, devoid of science exposure, and reinforcing of negative behavior patterns. These initial efforts blossomed into programs such as growing vegetables, recycling, aquaculture, work with endangered species, and bee keeping. Lecture series and other educational and training programs became a staple of the offerings [2], [3].

A more recent initiative involves bringing nature imagery to inmates who do not have access to SPP's or INSPIRE's science lectures or conservation projects. The extreme of social and nature deprivation occurs in "Special Housing Units" where men and women are held in solitary confinement, living in 9'x12' cells for 23 hours a day, with one hour per day in slightly larger exercise rooms. In 2014, INSPIRE and SPP-Oregon collaborated with staff at a SuperMax prison to create "The Blue Room," one such exercise room in which a projector was installed. In the Blue Room, inmates view images of the natural world in looping videos. For inmates in this situation, seeing images of life and Earth serves to reconnect them, and a boundary-less viewpoint helps them see beyond their walls [4], [5]. TIME Magazine recognized this intervention as one of its "Best Ideas of 2014" [6].

The collaborative team will leverage the lecture series programs of SPP and INSPIRE. We will deliver 5 lectures per year in different SPP Network correctional facilities across the US. Scientists will receive strong support in how to prepare themselves and their material for delivery in these environments and to these audiences.

The team is also building on the foundation of the Blue Room imagery work, adding astrobiology and space science images to broker connections for inmates to the cycles of the cosmos, our common origins, and the excitement of the possibility of life elsewhere in the Universe. In the 1970's when NASA provided us our first glimpse of Earth from space, a reframing of our place in the Universe catalyzed a movement of environmental stewardship. In a similar vein, these images can help inmates contemplate their place in the world, and inspire stewardship of self and relationships.

References:

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