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THE ROLE OF CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY IN LEARNING AND THINKING ABOUT NATURAL RESOURCES

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ABSTRACT: Often, students disassociate their role as citizens living in a democracy from their current role as students and, eventually, their role as natural resource professionals. There is a need in natural resources education to *re*-associate these roles. The question is how to do it in a way that is meaningful to students. In 1999, the Colleges of Natural Resources and Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota embarked on a three-year project with the Hong Kong Institute of Education to develop educational programs related to civic responsibility, moral development, and environmental and natural resources education. The project was begun in response to Hong Kong's status as a special administrative region of China. It was designed to look at the role of education in building a new democracy. Environmental education was selected as a specific type of education that could be looked upon as a catalyst for getting people (ordinary citizens) involved in shaping policies that would affect their lives. How were the lessons learned in China used in natural resources

education in the College of Natural Resources at Minnesota? During Fall semester 2001 a freshman honors colloquium in the College of Natural Resources was designed to expose students to a variety of natural resource and land-use concerns occurring at the rural/urban interface. Specifically, the course—"Sprawl, Smart Growth, Sustainability and Civic Responsibility: the Rural/Urban Interface"—was designed to help students: (a) identify natural resource concerns at the rural/urban interface; (b) appreciate that addressing these concerns is an interdisciplinary process; (c) understand that despite the best scientific knowledge we have at any point in time, in the end, natural resource and landscape decisions reflect societal values; and (d) describe a process for achieving smart growth and sustainable places that includes the biophysical component, values individuals' place on the landscape, and decisions individuals and society make given the knowledge and values they bring to bear on the issue at hand. In this class, students decide the kinds of knowledge and skills needed in the nation's citizenry to successfully address natural resource problems. Based on the skills they select as most important, they decide on and build a course reading list. To understand how the role of citizen and natural resource professional are associated, they engage in a variety of learning experiences in the real world with real-world decision makers (e.g., mayors, city councils, planning commissions, state agency natural resource professionals, advocacy groups, land developers). Students evaluate the process they have followed in the course, their experiences in the course, and the impact they believe it will have on their education. In other words, do they see this type of learning experience as one that helps them to understand the link between their education and building an informed and involved citizenry?