

your connection to **The Boston Globe**

ECOLOGIST ERIC STRAUSS | MEETING THE MINDS

He aims to balance people with nature

By Andrew Rimas, Globe Correspondent | December 18, 2006



Eric Strauss has had many jobs, from motorcycle mechanic to policeman. Now he directs environmental studies at Boston College and helps turn city kids on to science. (DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF)

The words "university professor" and "motorcycle mechanic" don't often appear in the same resume. Clearly, Eric Strauss, director of Boston College's Environmental Studies Program, took a roundabout path to climbing the ivory tower.

"I dropped out of high school when my mother became terminally ill," says the Barnstable native, now 47. As a teenager, he worked at a garage to put food on the table but was drawn back to school by Pete Auger, a favorite biology teacher, who taught him a love of fieldwork, of marching out into the grass with a pair of binoculars and an eye for bird-watching.

"Eric was exceptionally bright," says Auger, who now works under Strauss at Boston College. "Like most unconventionally talented students, he needed to explore issues that were multifaceted. Motorcycles were intriguing, but his curiosity wouldn't be satisfied by a temporary fascination."

After a stint at Emerson College, Strauss moved back to Cape Cod to work as a policeman.

"I wore a Smokey the Bear hat," he laughs. "And I enforced hunting and fishing law."

But again, the lure of the field won out, and he went to Tufts University for a PhD in ecology.

Back in an urban environment again, Strauss became fascinated with humanity's role within the interlocking cogs of ecological systems -- in particular with the question of how human density affects and is affected by the other members of the natural order.

"Rivers, tree cover, plants, and animals all play a vital role in maintaining conditions within our cities," he says.

He cites the example of Boston's coyotes: Wild coyotes multiply and prey on cats. Without those natural predators, the bird population increases, which allows mosquitoes to thrive, which in turn leads to a greater threat of West Nile virus for humans.

Strauss wants to be part of maintaining the balance between city dwellers and nature. A decade ago he helped found the Urban Ecology Institute, a nonprofit organization that educates urban youth in science and works with them to improve green spaces and engender a sense of community stewardship. Students track animals and monitor water quality, among other things.

"Something as simple as planting trees cleans the air, soaks up storm water, and reduces heating costs," Strauss says. "And studies have shown that people behave differently when there are trees around."

Instead of spreading suburban development farther and farther from urban cores, Strauss says Americans need to work harder to create livable cities.

"We destroyed 90 percent of Boston's wetlands," he says. "Now, every storm breaks over the sea walls. It wouldn't happen if we still had the saltmarshes."

To heal some of these environmental wounds, says Strauss, we have to think more collectively. Strauss envisions a future America where nearly everyone lives in cities composed of interlocking, sustainable neighborhoods.

"Local food resources, local power generation, local decision-making," he says. It would be more a shift in mind-set than in quality of life.

"I'm not asking people to love animals or to handle snakes," he laughs. "We just can't measure success anymore by the size of someone's house."

Hometown: Barnstable.

Family: His second wife, Erin, was his mother's homecare nurse during her final year. Three step-daughters, age 20-17. Two golden retrievers, Kess and Tucker. "I need to spend time with non-human animals!"

Hobbies: Mountain-biking; ocean kayaking; photography. Also he plays blues guitar in a band called The Ecotones.

On Hurricane Katrina: Strauss blames overdevelopment for the scale of the disaster. "Those people were abandoned 40 years ago when the wetlands were destroyed and the barrier islands developed." A more harmonious melding of environment and people would have reduced the impact, he says.