

We asked a recent alumni, Cori Stanek, to share her reflections on what the Landscape and Livelihood experience meant to her. Here's what she sent us.

The alarm rings, its 5 AM and I fumble with sleepy hands for the off switch, not wanting to wake my roommates. I pull myself out of the coziness of my bunk, change, and make my way to the door. The old floorboards of The Barn creak and echo as I move across the room. Sleepy feet hit the stairs and I just barely miss hitting my head on an overhanging beam at the base of the staircase. I fumble for my shoes in the dark, finding them by chance, and open the door to the cool, misty dampness of fall. The stars shine boldly in an inky Montana sky and are met gracefully by the Swan range as the sun inches toward the horizon.

It's another still morning in the Swan Valley and the beginning of another day in the Landscape & Livelihood Field Semester. I started each of my mornings in the weeks between September and October this way, rising early to greet the day personally, quietly, making coffee for my classmates, my friends.

*"I began to find within myself a sort of practical environmentalism that faced these complexities head-on..."*

It's difficult to explain precisely how my semester in the Swan Valley influenced me. Mostly because it is still so fresh, still affecting the way I see the world and my own role in it. In the two short months that I spent as a part of Landscape & Livelihood I was pushed, prodded, and challenged in my values, my perceptions, and actions. I was asked to open my eyes and look into the face of the human-environment relationship, to see it for its tense complexity and humbling reality.

Of all that I gained from this past semester, that sense of complex reality is what has stuck with me the most. I came into the Landscape & Livelihood program with a strong environmental background. Early grooming from an environmentally based high school, and further education at an environmental liberal arts college, exposed me to a breed of environmentalism that grew from the sight of a degraded natural world, valued pristine wilderness, and was romantic in its view of the future. Though I still believe that these things have their place, the Landscape & Livelihood semester pushed



Cori Stanek during Landscape and Livelihood 2007

me to take a hard look at the human-environment relationship and not shy away from its somewhat intimidating complexities but 'dig my heels into' a community of people in a completely new place. In doing so, I began to find within myself a sort of practical environmentalism that faced these complexities head-on and recognizes the value of land from a myriad of different lenses.

From the commercial logger, the rancher, and the hunter to the ecologist, artist, and conservationist, we learned from the Swan Valley community and developed our own sense of what it means to conserve. We came to understand a kind of environmental movement that is built around communities and the intricacies of their relationship with the land.

It's a bold question, how do we find a balance between our lives and the landscape? How do we work through the mess of misconceptions and find ground where communities can work together to manage the land in a way that makes the most sense for their needs and the needs of the natural world? This is the ever-present question and the face community conservation, practical environmentalism, and the future of the human-environment debate. The semester I spent in the Swan Valley has grounded me in this reality and has prepared me to find that balance, to embrace it's complexities, and find a path that sustains the beauty of a place- the honest beauty of the people and the splendid beauty of the landscape. ∞