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Eye on the Environment

## Home Sweet Homestays

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I am an alumni of Northwest Connections' fall field semester, Landscape and Livelihood. This two month intensive semester teaches students about natural resources and community based conservation in a refreshing and inspiring out of the classroom method.

Throughout the semester emphasis was placed on acquiring a "sense of place" and on the community in which we were going to work, play, and study in. The idea is to integrate community values into the curriculum as much as possible. A key component to linking the Swan Valley community and our natural resource lessons is the homestay weekend.

So what exactly is a homestay you might ask? For one weekend during the semester, each student is paired with a "homestay" family where they participate in the everyday life and activities of individuals and families in the valley. Students are integrated into chores, meals, and projects, and share in the normal home life of their homestay family. The homestay provides local families an opportunity to teach students from all over the country about living in rural areas.

The goal of the homestay is to close the gap between rural communities and conservation professionals by exposing soon-to-be professionals to the values and lifestyles incorporated in a rural community.

Rural residents provide students with new and important perspectives. I can tell you from personal experience that a lot can be learned in a weekend.

Being a bit on the shy side, I was apprehensive at the prospect of spending a weekend with strangers. I was to spend the weekend with Max and Ellie Greenough. Ellie works as the Condon post mistress and Max contracted work as a logger and took on various other jobs that required the heavy machinery he owned.

Max's work as a logger allowed him to spend his days outside. He had a passion for the outdoors and was an avid fisherman and hunter. Although our opinions tended to differ on some issues, our love for the outdoors was the common ground that we built upon. During my first night with the Greenoughs we discussed several topics.

From the start I knew Max and I were not going to agree on everything. Feeling out of my element and with the intention of not ruffling anyone's feathers, I listened to what Max had to say and said little myself. The evening ended on a good note and plans were made for me to go to work with Max the next day. This was the beginning of a very important lesson.

My day on the job with Max was a great experience. His warm heart and sense of humor put me at ease and the conversation flowed easily. We talked about the wildlife he would see while working, patterns he noticed in the valley, and we discussed the impacts that his work had on the environment.

That evening over dinner, Max and I had a lively conversation and we covered a range of topics. We were both having a lot of fun, and, despite the fact that the conversation would get a little heated we were listening to one another. Although neither of us changed our minds completely, there was an exchange of ideas that became food for thought. I came away that evening

having learned an important lesson: when we listen to all sides of an issue, it can lead to mutual respect and understanding, even if in the end, we agree to disagree.

The next day I spent with Ellie. Ellie is wealth of knowledge. During our horseback ride and hike along Holland Lake, I was lucky enough to tap into some of her knowledge of the area. My day with her impressed upon me, once again, the importance of local knowledge and how I could learn from her in a few hours what might take weeks/months/years of observations to learn on my own.

Since Landscape and Livelihood, I have graduated with a degree in Wildlife Biology and have had several jobs where the work being done is complex and at times controversial within the local community. In those instances I have relied on the lessons I learned during my homestay with Max and Ellie, and they have served me well.

I continue to be impressed with local knowledge and how keyed in people are to their surroundings. I also appreciate the ability to form a solid and lasting friendship with someone in the span of a weekend, like my friendship with the Greenoughs.

My homestay was not the only one that resulted in a meaningful friendship. In 2003 student Zach Wallace spent the weekend hiking, talking, and cutting firewood with Scott Tomson, US Forest Service Wildlife Biologist in Lolo National Forest and the Seeley Ranger District. The homestay provided Zach with a glimpse into life as a Wildlife Biologist in the valley.

“We have developed a long term, symbiotic relationship, which is really pretty cool,” is how Scott described his friendship with Zach. Since they first met, Scott has become a good friend, professional contact and landlord.

In 2008 student Maddie Ruth stayed with Maynard and Delores Freyholtz. Reflecting on her homestay experience

Maddie said, “I am finally starting to understand the valley, its people and their ethics. Living with the Freyholtz family in the community has allowed me to step into it rather than simply continue to learn about it as a guest.”

Leah Swartz, a student in 2009, spent her homestay weekend cooking, hiking, and horseback riding with her homestay family, Rip and Leanna Grubaugh. Leah described her homestay weekend as, “a great way to get more involved with the community and get a different perspective on local issues. For me, it helped me see how people who live in Condon make a living and interact with the landscape.”

These are just a few examples of how much the homestays can mean to students and why it is a vital part of the field semester. Echoing my feelings about the homestay, Zach Wallace stated, “I think the folks at Connections do a great job of placing homestays. Sometimes the students just have a good time and learn something new about the valley, but sometimes the relationships that they establish can last a lifetime.”

The homestay is a core part of the Landscape and Livelihood experience, and this year the homestay weekend will be October 8<sup>th</sup> to October 10<sup>th</sup>. If you are interested in participating in this great opportunity, please contact the Northwest Connections office at 754-3185.