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Visiting Students Learn Locally, Education Enriched in the Swan

Story and Photos by CAROLINE JENKINS of the *Pathfinder*

For the last eight years near a dozen students annually – from diverse backgrounds and diverse communities – have embedded themselves in the Swan Valley for an 8-week field study with Northwest Connections (NwC). The culmination of their study is a presentation, open to the public and the critique of their peers.

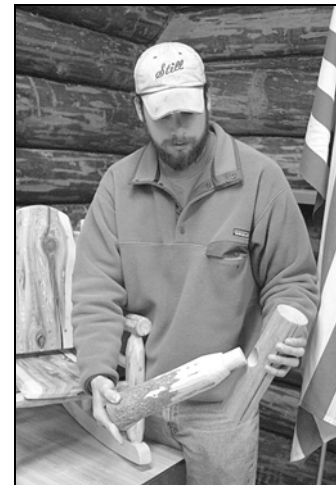
On October 28 eleven students from this year’s program gave overviews of their Community and Conservation Research Project – a 9-day independent study - and discussed their learnings and eye-opening experiences.

“Students often realize how little they know about the place where they grew up and they end up wanting to go home and develop the same level of connection to their home that they develop for the Seeley-Swan,” said Melanie Parker, Co-Founder and Executive Director of NwC.

“Our program is designed as a hands-on approach to learning,” she added. “We give students a taste of rural life and we engage them with biologists, loggers, ranchers, outfitters and home owners so they’ll have an array of perspectives and apply what they learn here in their future careers.”

“More than anything, students get the opportunity to learn first hand from rural residents about the way rural communities are affected by environmental problems. Our hope is that as students grow into conservation professionals, this information will serve them well in crafting solutions that enjoy broad support.”

This year’s independent study presentations ranged from Wildfires and Rural Communities to Black Bear Management to Recycling in the Swan Valley.



Flynt Barksdale, a forestry major from Auburn University, talking about the mortise and tenon joints on the children’s chairs he made. Flynt chose to make furniture as he wanted to learn a useful skill.



Katherine Hogle, a student from Seattle, explored algae in the Swan Valley. One algae she researched is extremely invasive and can take over a whole riverbed, according to Katherine.

Jonathan Nelson, a student from Virginia Tech, did his research project on Log Home Building. He worked with three local builders and learned about a specific notching technique called saddle notching. Jonathan also looked at the economics of log building and factors that influence log home building in a rural community.



Krystina Andrews singing her story song.

Krystina Andrews, originally from Hawaii and studying environmental studies with a focus on literature at Whitman College in Washington, studied connecting people to place through storytelling.

Krystina had the pleasure of staying with Sharon MacQuarrie during her homestay. Krystina was treated to many stories of Sharon's life growing up on the Diamond L Bar guest ranch in the Swan and she decided to write a children's story entitled "Sharon's Montana Home".

Krystina illustrated the story and wrote a song to accompany it. She sang her story to the local students at Swan Valley School.

Krystina realized the importance of place-based education and how it can increase students' understanding of why things are important. She also realized that knowing the history of the area you're from helps to keep the past alive. There were hopes in the audience that Krystina will pursue publication of her beautiful tale.

If you haven't attended these presentations in the past, stay tuned for next year. This is a fantastic educational program whose outcome is wonderful to see.

The Landscape and Livelihood Program is accredited by the University of Montana and has covered a series of subjects: Biogeography of Northwest Montana; Watershed Dynamics; and Forests & Communities. Students also have acquired field skills and partaken in several community events. For program highlights visit the 'Barn Blog' at www.northwestconnections.org.