



October 15, 2009

Students Get Opportunity to “Dig-Into” the Valley

By Cori Stanek

It’s October, and throughout the valley fall is creeping its way into the landscape. Cottonwood leaves drop, crashing, quietly into the duff below. The water of the Swan River seems to slow, consistency changing as days grow shorter and nights get colder.



Students gather after spending the morning working with a local landowner – each fall Northwest Connections hosts 12 undergraduate students as a part of their Landscape & Livelihood Field Semester.

And, on the old Beck homestead, Northwest Connections’ Landscape & Livelihood students have settled in to their own little place in the valley. You may have seen them around in the past month, an eager herd of twelve college students surveying stands of timber, slogging up stream channels, and descending on the Mission Mountain Mercantile.

Right along with the changing of seasons, over the past 9 years, fall in the Swan has also meant a

new brood of young minds gathering at Northwest Connections for the Landscape & Livelihood Field Semester. Students arrive each year from a variety of home landscapes both locally and from more distant places—Wisconsin, South Carolina, Vermont, and Nova Scotia to name a current few. For some, it’s their first time in Montana and for others its an extension of home.



Northwest Connections’ Landscape & Livelihood students explore Cottonwood Creek near Ovando, MT for aquatic mammal tracks, as a part of their Watershed Dynamics class. Mammalian ecology in Swan wetlands is also a topic of study for one student this CCRP season. Photos provided.

The goal of the semester is to bring together students, staff, and guest speakers from richly diverse backgrounds, landscapes, and perspectives to collaborate and learn about ecology and conservation that is rooted in a place and in a community.

As a part of Landscape & Livelihood, students receive 15 university credits and focus their energies on five main courses—Biogeography of NW Montana, Watershed Dynamics, Forests & Communities, Field Skills for Conservation, and an independently designed Community Conservation Research Project (CCRP).

Since their arrival at the beginning of September, the students have been wearing forestry hats, watershed hats, restoration hats, and policy hats—laying the groundwork for a conservation ethic of their very own. However, starting this week the L&L students get to take hold of the

reigns and dig their heels into another project and topic all their own.

The CCRP project allows students to take what they have learned throughout the first portion of their semester, mix it with their own interests and strengths, and create a project that allows them to further develop their own conservation-based education.

Projects take on many forms as the infancy stages of brainstorming begin. Some are heavily skill based—designed to deepen field research skills. This year, Emily Gamm, a Wildlife Biology student from Iowa State University, is looking to develop a project researching Northern Bog Lemmings on a handful of Swan Valley wetlands. Emily's goal for the project is to survey for populations of the sensitive species as baseline data for studies and restoration initiatives in the future. Similarly, Amelia O'Conner, an Environmental Studies student from Linfield College, is developing her skills in the field as she works with an arsenal of stream surveying tools to complete a stream-typing project on the Beck homestead.

However, not all of the CCRP projects carry a heavy field emphasis. Many students also choose to tackle projects that are more socially rooted. Asha Bienkowski, a Biology student from Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia, is taking on a project that aims to highlight the stories of women homesteaders in the valley. She hopes to surface inspiring stories of single women that proved-up on land of their own following the Homestead Act of 1916. Similarly, Sam Berry, a Fine Arts major at Northland College, is looking to highlight the oral histories of local community members through interviews and the production of a series of lithographic prints.

What holds the CCRP project together is a backbone of three main components: initial, comprehensive research; the development of a physical skill; and personal engagement with community members, usually through a interviewing process. The goal of CCRP is that students have the chance to engage in a topic that interests them, as well as allowing them to connect with the valley community in a way that

is more personally grounded. It's also a wonderful opportunity for the community to get to know Northwest Connections and their students a little bit better.

At the end of the project timeline, as a culmination of the experiences and knowledge the students gain during the course of their work on CCRP, Northwest Connections hosts a CCRP Presentation Day at the Condon Community Hall.

The event, which is held each October, provides an opportunity for students to present their material, share their experiences, and demonstrate the skills they have developed over the course of independent study. Presentation day is open to the community and has become a highlight of the semester over the years. In a way, the day has become both a celebration of the completion of the Landscape & Livelihood semester, and an opportunity for students to give back to the community that has graciously hosted them for two months.

This fall, the twelve L&L students will be giving their presentations in the community hall, just as in years past, as their time in the Seeley-Swan valley begins to draw to a close. As an important part of this place, and the Landscape & Livelihood semester, we welcome you to join us for the presentations' open house

Community Conservation Research Project Presentations

Tuesday, October 27th

9:00 AM – 4:00 PM

Swan Valley Community Hall

Presentations will start at 9:00 AM and run throughout the day.