



STUDENTS STUDY COOPERATIVE CONSERVATION IN SWAN VALLEY

Taking a Human Approach to Conservation

By Web Master, 9-26-08

For 11 college students living and studying in the Swan Valley for eight weeks, conservation is more than just science and fieldwork. It involves a lot of socializing: chatting with the locals and immersing themselves in the community. It's called cooperative conservation.

The students are part of a field-semester program called Landscape and Livelihood, which is administered by Northwest Connections and accredited through the University of Montana. They earn 15 credits and the program runs from Sept. 1 to Oct. 29.

The goal is to instill in the students a deep-rooted knowledge of the area's geographical and cultural history by exposing them to a diverse cross section of people and opinions within a rural community. This helps them to better understand the problems facing interdependent ecosystems, and the dynamic relationships created by mix-use lands, including corporate timber, public multiple-use, wilderness and private residential.

"How can we live sustainably in a place like this, and how can we work together to make that happen?" Northwest Connections program director Mo Hartmann said.

It's a complex issue to take on: incorporating cooperative conservation, sustainability and policy, while maintaining a dialogue with the rural community and involving the local people as part of the solution. Throughout the semester, students work alongside biologists, loggers, ranchers, outfitters and homeowners, taking a hands-on approach to examine how rural communities tie back in to their own lives. These are wildlife biologists and natural resource managers in the making.

Students listen to oral histories, sit in on panel discussions and mull over the ecological impacts of watershed dynamics. They spend time in the field, learning the basics of forest ecology: stand types; forest succession; the impact of disturbances; and forest management.

At the beginning of the semester, they also went on a nine-day pack trip in the Bob Marshall Wilderness, studying the biogeology of the wilderness area from the forest floor up.

"We were studying different plant species and micro climates – seeing how they've changed," Auburn University forestry major Flynt Barksdale said. "It was really neat, the highlight so far, but the semester is young."

Barksdale, a senior who plans on pursuing a masters of science in water resources, came to Montana because of its well-known conservation history. Northwest Connections intern Zach Wallace came for the same reason.

"I lived in the Midwest and East all my life," Wallace, who went to a liberal arts college in New York, said. "I wanted a taste. Montana is an epic place in the history of conservation. We read about it in our text and I wanted to find a way to get out here and study."

During a field semester in 2003 in Montana, Wallace said he was amazed by the expertise and dedication of his instructors.

"They're a dying breed," Wallace said of the instructors. "Whether it be botany and wildlife, policy or soil dynamics, they take a real holistic approach. They're master generalists. It completely changed my understanding of the potential for learning and how I wanted to be educated, and how I wanted to structure my life."

Not every student returns to Montana after the field semester, but Hartmann says the combination of education and

fieldwork interwoven with a human element leaves a lifelong impression on her students, like it did for Wallace.

“Any time I thought about settling down in one place, I thought of this place,” Wallace said. “I know this place more than I know anywhere else.” **[End of article]**

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