



October 15, 2008

*Outdoors*

## **Students get hands-on experience in Swan Valley classroom**

Story by Jeff Osteen

Eleven university students from around the country are making a classroom out of Swan Valley this semester as part of the two-month-long Landscape and Livelihood program, administered by Northwest Connections and accredited by the University of Montana.

“We try to make it a pretty holistic experience,” said Mo Hartmann, program director for Northwest Connections. She said the semester goal was to immerse young conservation leaders in a dynamic community that would help them become good environmental problem solvers.

Students earn 15 credits by studying several different topics including Biogeography of Northwest Montana, Watershed Dynamics and Forests and Rural Communities, all while living in a remodeled dairy barn on an 80-acre homestead.

“You’d never be able to tell cows once resided there,” Hartmann said. She said the program is distinguished by its hands-on approach to instruction led by a core teaching staff that has lived in the area for a decade or more, some for as long as 30 years.

The group recently donned masks and wetsuits for a nighttime snorkeling session in the Swan River to link the concepts

they’ve been studying with real-life scenarios. “The goal here is for them to observe native fish and fish habitat first-hand to cement their studies in watershed dynamics,” Hartmann said.

Cultural elements are as important to an area as geographical ones. Missoula-area students are exposed to a rural community that includes loggers, ranchers, foresters and biologists with a diverse array of opinions. Maintaining a dialogue with the local community is important in solving some of our modern ecological problems, according to Hartmann.

This Thursday, students will learn the tools to protect working forestlands, public access and wildlife habitat as land is sold in the Swan Valley as part of a conservation strategies segment.

The group will organize with the local community and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks to look at strategies that involve the community in preventing widespread development through public acquisition, working forest easements and community management. “How do you look past those arbitrary lines of ownership?” asked Hartmann.

Those interested in registering for a field semester in Swan Valley can do so through Northwest Connections by calling 406-754-3185.

[jeff.osteen@umontana.edu](mailto:jeff.osteen@umontana.edu)