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UM students learn realities of landscapes, livelihoods

By MICHAEL JAMISON of the Missoulian

COLUMBIA FALLS - It's easy - a bit too easy, perhaps - to pigeonhole a big international corporation.

For better or worse, social baggage weighs down each and every impression of a company such as Plum Creek Timber Co.

Likewise, try as you might, it's awfully hard not to conjure up a stereotype when you stop to consider a Missoula university student, particularly one pursuing environmental studies.

"But then they meet face to face," said Melanie Parker, "and suddenly you realize the world isn't quite what you thought it was. It's a lot more complicated."

On Monday, Parker introduced a handful of complications to a pair of Flathead Valley lumber mills, guiding a half-dozen conservation-minded students into a sawdust-laden world of blue collars.

Called Landscape and Livelihood, the program is designed to bridge the gap between, well, landscapes and livelihoods, to "get past the perception that it's jobs or the environment, one or the other."

Getting past that perception is a major goal of Northwest Connections, the organization Parker and husband Tom founded in the Swan Valley, on what they consider to be the common ground shared by all who call Montana's wild lands home.

They started with local issues, local outreach, local educational programs in which everyone had something to learn and something to teach.

Then, back in 1999, "we began to recognize that there just weren't any quality field-based educational programs out there at the university level," Tom said.

In 2000, they teamed with the University of Montana and offered their first full semester

in the forest. The Swan Valley, Melanie said, provided the perfect laboratory: It's home to corporate timber lands, public multiple-use lands, wilderness, residential development and endangered species.

"The rubber meets the road there on just about every issue," Melanie said.

But the curriculum begins well off the road, with a backpacking field trip into the high hills. Students learn a bit of geology, some soils science, forestry, botany, zoology.

Tom, a hunting outfitter, leads them through the Bob Marshall Wilderness and into a crash course on natural history.

They learn to read the glacial topography, and then to read between the lines, interpreting the connections and associations between habitats and the species who claim them.

Overlay that landscape with some hydrology, perhaps nighttime snorkeling to identify fish, visits with loggers and ranchers and conservationists and newcomers in their second homes, even some aging back-to-the-landers.

They do some hard work, maybe a day out fencing, after which, Melanie said, "it's a lot tougher to just tell a rancher to fence his cattle off the riverbank."

"That's part of it," Melanie said, "bringing a little humility and civility to your relationships."

And then, finally, the question: What to do about this friction between landscape and livelihood?

Too often, she said, the debate is framed as black and white, either or, "one version of reality or the other."

What the program tries to provide, she said, is the complex pattern of gray in between.

On Monday, that gray took the form of an affable gentleman named Frosty Buck.

If Plum Creek Timber carries some baggage, Frosty Buck surely does not. But Buck is Plum Creek, too, working as purchasing agent for the company's plywood mill in Columbia Falls.

He, more than anything students saw in their tour of the mill, put a face on the debate between conservation and industry.

"And that," Melanie said, "is when youth begin to be inspired."

Inspired enough, she said, to ask the tough questions and to be content that there might not be any easy answers. "What is sustainability?" she asked by way of example.

"Frankly, it's a lot more elusive than most people think."

But if only most people would think, Tom said, they would come to realize there are some solutions more sensible than others, solutions that allow communities to be both stewards and users of the land.

Toward the end of the 15-credit semester, he said, students will embark on an independent project, apprenticing to master a skill from rural Montana, blending the field with the classroom in a truly interdisciplinary way.

"It makes it human," Melanie said. "Some day, when they go back to solve a conservation problem, they'll be able to relate to the people affected."

And, with any luck, those people will relate to them, as well.

Plum Creek, in other words, becomes not just a big corporate landowner, but also a community of folks like Frosty Buck, and that environmental studies student becomes a participant in that community.

"The hope," Tom said, "is sustainable economies, sustainable livelihoods, sustainable forests. It's what's possible."