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Montana transforms into classroom for some Whitties

By [Kara McKay](#) of the Whitman Pioneer

For the first two months of fall semester, when juniors Julia Lakes and Leora Stein woke up for class, they didn't once trudge across campus to enter the confines of Maxey or Olin Hall. Instead, they stepped outside, onto a historic homestead in the forested mountain valley of Swan Valley, Mont.

The pair were part of a group of 12 students from across the U.S. enrolled in the "Landscape and Livelihood" course, an intensive residential program focused on ecology and community-based conservation.

The program, which is run by Northwest Connections, a nonprofit ecological monitoring organization, combines fieldwork with reading, reflective writing, classroom lecture, independent study and involvement in community activities. Students receive a total of 15 credits through the University of Montana in Forestry and Conservation, Environmental Studies, Recreation Management and Geography.

"Landscape and Livelihood" begins with a nine-day backpacking trip in the Bob Marshall Wilderness, where students study the biogeography of northwest Montana. Students spend the remainder of the two months on the Beck Homestead, where they live in a renovated historic dairy barn located on 80 acres of forest, prairie and Swan River frontage.

"During a typical day, we would have morning class in which we'd spend a few

hours talking about readings and hammering out terms that we might hear from speakers later in the day. Afternoons we'd be out in the field talking with people, exploring the valley and studying whatever pertained to the specific course at the time," said Stein, an environmental studies and sociology major.

In addition to biogeography, the program's courses include Watershed Dynamics, Forests and Rural Communities, Field Skills for Conservation Work and an independent study project.

"We literally had hundreds of speakers talk to us. [...] What other chance are you going to get to engage with these people? It was amazing to see the amount of passion all the speakers had on their topics—there's nowhere else you can get that," said Stein.

"For me, the biggest challenge was that everybody we met with thought that they were right. We met with loggers, and we met with environmentalists, and everybody thought what they were doing was completely right... Trying to figure out where my values come from there—what I think is right—was really difficult," said Lakes, an environmental humanities major.

While living at "The Barn," students share cooking and cleaning responsibilities, host guest speakers and partake in overnight homestays with local residents.

"It's great to have a really small, supportive community in which to live and learn. I made so many great friends. I'm still in contact with everyone from the program, and I miss them so much," said Stein.

Both Lakes and Stein agreed that their experiences have permanently changed their views of the environment, education and the way in which they spend their time.

“I used to consider myself an environmentalist, but I wouldn’t say that I’m opposed to logging anymore. It makes you realize how complicated issues are,” said Lakes.

“You have all these new ideas that you just created and then you’re just sent back out into the world. Where do you apply them? Whitman is so different from the program—how do you take what you found and transfer it back here?” said Stein.

“After being back at Whitman I realized, ‘Wow, I haven’t looked at the moon in a really long time.’ When you’re out there, you wake up and you go outside and see the stars and the moon because you’d wake up before the sun came up. There were so many things that you took advantage of when you were up there. It’s so easy to forget about those things in this rushed world,” said Lakes.

This year’s “Landscape and Livelihood” will take place Sept. 1 through Oct. 29. For more information, visit the Northwest Connections Web site at northwestconnections.org.

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