

Restoring Youth: Restoring Relationships to Wildlife and Wild Places

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Abstract—American Indian tribes recognize the most important resource for protecting the values of wild places is within youth. The Nez Perce Tribe, the San Carlos Apache Tribes and the Warm Springs Tribe are among many who have long emphasized the importance of initiating youth by providing experiences, activities and education in remote locations and carried that practice into modern day youth practicums. In addition, the USDA Forest Service has partnered with tribes through various federal training and youth programs. The Native American Fish and Wildlife Society continues to sponsor an annual national youth program for native youth and some regions have programs. The Los Padres National Forest in California also sponsored such a program in cooperation with the Santa Ynez Tribe for many years that provided a wilderness backcountry trip to complete restoration projects in the summer. The National Park Service joined the partnership one year to facilitate the program on the Channel Islands, bringing Chumash youth from the Santa Ynez Tribe back to the islands for the first time in many years. Access to federal lands is key in areas where tribes have small or fragmented land bases. This paper will focus on the intertribal native youth practicum that has been held for youth from multiple tribes in the Southwest region of the United States for the last eight years.

The Ladder Ranch

A consortium of government employees and educators created a partnership with the Ladder Ranch in New Mexico, part of Turner Enterprises. Long-term leadership of the program rests with John Antonio (Laguna Pueblo), of the Southwest Region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and co-founder of the Native American Fish and Wildlife Society. Norman Jjoba (Islet Pueblo) of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Northern Pueblo Agency, Jeannie Lubbering of Southwest Indian Polytechnic Institute, Steve Dobrott Ranch Manager of the Ladder Ranch in New Mexico, and Linda Moon Stumpff (Apache) of The Evergreen State College and USDA Forest Service (retired), have long-term roles in the intertribal youth practicum held annually in July. Many agencies, including the USDA Forest Service, U.S. Geological Survey, tribal government employees and nonprofit organizations and granting institutions have played important roles in producing a quality experience each summer.

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The Ladder Ranch offers a unique opportunity for students to participate in a restored landscape that encompasses the values of wild places on a reclaimed cattle ranch. It is a virtual laboratory for restoring more natural and sustainable ecosystems. Bison are currently on the ranch and create a more harmonious relationship to the natural ecosystem. Active and passive restoration processes are in place. Such activities may be contemplative such as developing a long-term vision for a restored landscape, or active such as restoring riparian and wetland areas to support a population of threatened Chiricahua leopard frogs. Sometimes cautious intervention occurs, such as participation in a project that brings captive-bred wolves back into the natural ecosystem.

Indigenous Origins for a Concept of Restoration-Based Learning

Restoring human relationships with the wild requires continuous study and learning that can only take place on lands that reflect natural processes and ecosystems. This has been understood by many cultures. The original purposes of the Wilderness Act captured the importance of wild areas for science and learning. From traditional initiation ceremonies to contemporary youth wilderness experiences and practicums, the introduction of youth into a special relationship with wildlife and the ecosystems on which they depend is an integral portion of growing up indigenous. This creates a special kind of wilderness education that encompasses a life orientation based in values as opposed to detachment and objectivity. Cultural values aim for education that achieves comprehensive understanding within a landscape rather than the capacity to apply fragmented analytical tools. Finally, indigenous knowledge and science is connected to reciprocal relationships and responsibility to other forms of life. This aspect is expressed through gaining an understanding of policy and planning where objectives point to a quality of life rather than the win/lose propositions of politics and economics. The concept of renewal, of body, mind and spirit in its relationship to the world is applied in the work of restoration that may be passive through limiting use, or cautiously active by integrating actions with ecosystem processes. This active practice of restoration is connected to an ethic centered on reciprocal relationships with all living things as a community that exists in natural places.

The idea of movement and activity is integral to learning in this model of indigenous wilderness education. Motion becomes a metaphor that is expressed in four ways through the Southwest Native Youth Practicum. In this paper, movement is characterized by first “spinning” to recalibrate perceptions by removing students from modern technology to a wild place. The second part of the journey includes the

bending of mind and body: physical activity, responsibility and community values are combined as students explore the systems and relationships of life in a unique restored landscape. The protected environment itself teaches an environmental ethic to those who live in it, even for a short time. Third, the students move the knowledge up and down the scales of western science as they learn applied scientific methodology for a variety of tasks from habitat assessment to water quality analysis. Finally, students come together in community to assess their learning in the round. They return to the recognition and application of cultural values and knowledge as they analyze current and potential future issues and concerns through a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) workshop and problem resolution exercises.

The nature of the relation between humans and the environment is continuous, thus the importance of the prefix “re” on the word restoration. The endless cycle of life is expressed through restoration and the related relationships of respect and reciprocity. Activities of renewal, recycling, rebuilding emphasize the “re” of life as students engage in the activities of restoration—recycling, rebuilding, and research through the science of wild places. The impacts of the last 500 years and the current speed at which global development is occurring give further depth to the meaning and task of restoration. Important goals for the Native Youth Practicum include involving youth in applied science in the context of wild places, integrating education with applied work and transforming the work into a community experience as the youth rediscover and reclaim their powerful relationship to the environment. Youth practicums, perhaps more than any other kind of program, provide an opportunity to share cultural perspectives on wild places, for in them youth and instructors walk backwards from where we are now and find a place where origins can be remade and a new journey begun.

Wild places today are even becoming more tied with the idea of restoration, due to the damage inflicted by the three Cs: colonization, commercialization and commodification. In many cases, tribal lands were severely damaged by a long history of federal management for “the public good” that neglected the federal trust to provide healthy homelands that reflected tribal values and needs. The concept of restoration takes on increased importance in this context. Today, tribes may need to look for alternative facilities for the practicums on public and private lands that exist outside reservation boundaries. The practicums are important because they can give youth purpose and vision as well as the technical skills to continue their education and continue the work of restoring, planning and enhancing tribal lands.

Besides provoking understanding of relationships from the natural laboratory of wild places and places that retain wild values through the process of restoration, these youth programs often combine modern science with traditional values and native science. They promote this way of “two-eyed seeing”—that is, one eye focused on the strength of indigenous knowledge and science and the other eye being on the strengths of modern science. Other common components of learning experiences in native youth practicums are collaborative group learning, interdisciplinary learning, and respect for diverse tribal traditions. A traditional approach to ecosystems includes an appreciation and respect for all of its gifts, from wildlife to clean water to natural beauty.

The combination of the idea of respect with the idea of a gift from the Creator leads to behavior change. Students begin accepting responsibility to protect and restore wild ecosystems through recognition of their reciprocal relationships with wildlife. Thus, throwing litter into a wild place becomes a rejection of one’s basic relationship to the universe and to the local community of living things. The idea of general interconnectedness with the universe and all life translates down into the connectedness of living in a particular place and a particular community of living beings.

Much of the training and education in the practicum is built up around this sense of connectedness that is translated into action through the ideas of continuous learning and restoration. Students must gain enough knowledge to assess water purity and be able to follow up with techniques to ensure its maintenance. Due to heavy human impacts, both within and around the perimeters of wild areas, the restorative approach is critical today. In addition, reservations whose location was once considered remote are now watching cities and developments coming over the horizon and up to their borders and are preparing for potential impacts.

Youth come to understand the traditional and scientific values of wildlife and wild places: they are the means to assure the continuance of wild places. In earlier times, Indian youth received instruction in a day-to-day manner from elders and from interactions with the natural world and through traditional cultural activities. Today, change is occurring. Some families do not live on their home reservations; others include dual working couples or single parents with limited time. Children are bussed to school far from their language, their culture, and their elders, and they are exposed to the modern world of technology through education and entertainment. Yet in-depth knowledge of wildlife and wild places is transmitted through the generations and is vitally needed as well as the tools of modern science if we are to sustain them into the future. Although youth programs cannot replace traditional cultural learning and activities, they can teach respect, good values and knowledge that leads youth to “see with both eyes.” It is important for them to learn how to do scientific analysis while providing opportunities for reaffirming cultural perspectives. In this way, the youth practicum replicates native science learning by creating a primarily native community of students and instructors who express similar values. Within this framework, not outside it, western scientific methodology is introduced as a useful tool.

Cosmology, philosophy, education, action and wisdom through planning and developing strategies for restoration are key components of the weeklong program. The environmental ethic here is based on respect and participation with a view to restoration. Considering vast damage to the land base over the last 500 years, wild or restored places offer the last models from which to learn. Through the practicum experience, students create a beginning, an origin story where western science meets native science to make new models for science and action that can connect actions to sustainability through participation. Students are encouraged to use creativity to interpret the experience of their participation with place while they also learn applied scientific techniques, methods and tools.

Story is extended through memory and continuing relationships: instructors and students come back year after year,

even after students go on to new levels in their education. Science is approached as a means to understand the processes; explanation and respect are embedded in cultural activities. By combining instruction in science with a place for students to learn values, a time and place is created where everyone has a part to play in the future strategy for a land base. By living in the framework of a camp set in a restored landscape, students learn to replicate the model of respect for life and land, understand ecological processes and their role in the distribution of energy.

One perspective on the collaborative learning process is to look at learning in wild places as movement. Active learning takes shape through spinning to recalibrate for a new perspective; bending as learning and reforming through practicing an ethic; holding, through listening and respectfulness; moving up and down to understand empirical and factual data through science. Finally, learning moves in a circular manner to incorporate an understanding of ecosystem processes and human relationships to restored lands.

Transformation: Spinning to Recalibrate

First, students are moved out of their day-to-day environments and steady-state activities. This creates a kind of spinning of the senses and a need to recalibrate and gain a new vision. They move to a new point of origin where stories, relationships and learning extend far beyond the week of the practicum. How the students and instructors got there, the events that occurred, and the experiences that make up a story of place begins an evolution of adapting and learning through culture and community. The methods of native science and the methods of western science coexist. The story is interpreted through their own experiences and activities. The journey of learning draws from experience and adds information, interpretation and understanding. The journey includes learning about responsibilities to each other and to all other creatures inhabiting the world with them. The story does not end, but passes through the stage of interpretation as students tackle tough issues of science and policy affecting tribes today. Finally, students write and reflect about their experience on the last day to gain understanding.

The Ladder Ranch has specific values: no snakes can be killed here, no unneeded development occurs. This underlines the sense of place, a place that is both sacred in a practical kind of way through its restoration and bounded. Students need to have such places to see in both new and old ways, because the modern technical society creates blindness to the natural world that would “deny the spirit and intelligence of nature.” There is a need to reconfigure perception. Students come from many tribes in the Southwest Region.

The student selection portion of the program is critical. Their participation is voluntary; they fill out detailed applications that present their reasons for participation. Parental support and consent is required. Parental involvement is encouraged through contact with instructors; they are greeted when they transport their youth to the staging site and any program details they have questions about are answered. Students are transported to the ranch in rental vehicles and spend the first day at the turn-of-the century lodge where

they are given an orientation to practicum values and expectations. Once at the ranch, all electronic devices must be turned in. Without electronic entertainment, students begin to relate to each other and the practicum instructors. Initial activities emphasize introductions, values and basic ecological concepts. They continue on to a discussion on ecological understanding. These activities are basic to transformative thought, which places science into a broader philosophy and cultural context.

Bending to Learn

The concept of bending extends to living with others, relating me to the community of learning to extend one's mind and understanding. When the group begins the first evening with a program centered on understanding the nature of relationships in the ecosystem, they begin to think in new terms. Often, a wildlife restoration project is also presented on this occasion. Students particularly enjoy the presentation on the Wolf Recovery Project, a model project that takes place on the Ladder Ranch. Mexican wolves are acclimated to the environment on the Ranch so that they can be released into wilderness areas on adjoining National Forest lands. Learning from wolf behavior, a technique of “soft release” where the wolves are allowed to escape from temporary enclosures has been shaped through the program. Students learn about the importance of the wolf's role in the ecosystem and they have the opportunity to observe and interact with a variety of wolf artifacts.

The next day students are transported via vehicle to the base camp along a remote stream with huge, beautiful sycamore trees. As students pack and prepare for their trip to a remote riparian ecosystem tucked away between the hills and mesas of the arid Southwest, they learn appropriate and respectful behavior. Skipping stones is not acceptable. They move away from activities that are direct linear extensions of self to activities that integrate them into the group and community of learners. These activities “bend students” in such a way as to instill a group ethic of “leave no trace.” Instructors begin to introduce the idea of responsibility to group and to landscape. Social and individual responsibility is cultivated rather than individualistic autonomy. The students explore individuality and liberty at the same time that they build relationships. This is a far cry from traditional science education where students work in isolation with a fragmented independence of action. This context celebrates human community as part of nature rather than separate from it.

Once in camp, group activities, like eating together, early morning bird walks or morning runs, wildlife observation, learning about healthy native foods, and making camp provide opportunities to learn together. A formal presentation on native foods also creates understanding of the great contributions of indigenous agriculture to a healthy diet and to medicine. An ethic of active restoration work is practiced. Students get up early in the morning. One might say the Apache saying “Chi igona' ai' nitis dahlsol ees hela,” or “Don't let the sun step over you” becomes a major theme. Rules and expectations are clearly defined by instructors and students are responsible for specific roles in cleaning, setting up camp and food preparation. A spiritual sense permeates

the program and students share prayers before meals and frequently give thanks.

Instructors teach by telling their stories to students as well as more formal presentations. John Antonio shared his childhood story of playing by the Rio Grande at his home in Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico. He and his small friends believed tadpoles came from the sky. They went to the river and caught them, throwing them up in the air so they might fall down like rain. However, they were observed by elders. Since John is a member of a family group that has special responsibilities for aquatic life, the elders made it eminently clear to him that this behavior should never be repeated. Other instructors shared stories about contact with snakes, an activity that is avoided by some tribes in the Southwest. Some of the stories demonstrated the adaptation of indigenous practice to modern scientific study. Some found they were able to maintain the ethic of not disturbing animals but were able to allow actions that help the animal. Students who practice cultural beliefs that do not allow touching or even viewing snakes and some amphibians are not required to participate in the herpetology work, but they may have a separate discussion of their beliefs along with some scientific discussion with an alternative instructor.

Throughout the practicum, students have the opportunity to express themselves in their own way. Some draw, some write more, and some are more verbal than others. Most of all, the skill of attentive observation is practiced.

Along the way to the remote campsite, the participants take in a landscape level view of the land as they observe a series of restored areas. They observe herds of American bison (buffalo in common terms) on the highland grass areas, getting their first lessons in quiet observation and respect for wild animals. These American bison are part of a herd with the purest genetics of the wild bison of the plains. The impressive nature of this animal speaks louder than words. The bison is a symbol of the foundations of an indigenous cosmology where all living things have rights begins. Another stop at a pond reflects the work of the ranch's herpetologist: the pond has been enlarged to create a habitat for the endangered Chiricahua leopard frog. The buffalo has already taught the lesson of respect; no stones are thrown, nor loud noises heard. The road leads deep into a hidden arroyo where a healthy riparian ecosystem functions. Finally, the group arrives at the camp area and the vehicles leave. The campsite area was a historical use area for many tribes, as evidenced by the Anasazi petroglyphs and historical accounts of campgrounds used by Victoria and the Warm Springs Apache. The place, with its high values and functioning ecosystems, provides a wild outdoor laboratory for learning. This is one of the few areas in the Southwest that is free of cattle permits and public hunting, both activities are permitted on many of the designated wilderness areas in the Southwest.

The holding in place mode can also be connected to activities. Camp etiquette is built around "Leave No Trace Indigenous." Students share their cultural practices and knowledge to clear campsites so they will not be observed by others. They help build efficient campfires, practice careful wood gathering and other techniques they may have learned at home. In addition, they dig latrines, pick up all trash, and cover the camp area with leaves and sticks. The value of respectfulness is key. The teaching is culture-based

and value-based, students help to reinforce these values with other students. Since students are given roles and responsibilities for serving food, cleaning and setting up tents, so distributed power distributes energy. They gain a clearer understanding of what they are taking and what they are giving from the landscape. The restored landscape highlights respectfulness since littering can be understood as an offence against respectfulness and even operationalized sometimes through understanding the consequences to animals that the Ladder Ranch is trying to restore. Science is demonstrated through litter pick-up, behaving as to avoid disturbing wildlife, burying the campfire and removing traces of our short-term habitation.

Instructors lead a nature walk soon after camp is made. Again, activity is a part of holding in place and maintaining through symbolic actions and attentiveness to cultural values and observation. Holding in place is not static, but rather a constant shimmy, whether walking, observing, or discussing food gathering or hunting, enjoying stories around the campfire (especially those around traditional hunting and fishing), and responding to the constant stimulus of living things in a restored landscape. These create a special timbre of holding in place in restoration. This component provides a platform for the applied science of restoration through work, play, ritual, food gathering, and stories related to natural resources, hunting and fishing.

Moving Around the Circle: Understanding Analysis and Interpreting Our Future

The process of learning in a circular motion through walks that integrate knowledge and learning with experience is translated into analysis through activities involving policy analysis and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Students analyze practices for managing activities in wild places and the process of making decisions. They experience the interconnection of ideas as they develop visions and strategies, solve problems, communicate, and understand ecosystem processes and analysis. The talent show and the application of humor provide relief from the intensive work. Work and play are balanced as students get to know each other and communicate their ideas and talent.

In problem solving exercises, they demonstrate understanding alternatives and outcomes and their ability to resolve conflict. They role-play through the issues to understand threats to tribal lands, especially wildlife, wild places and sacred lands. These activities are especially humorous and instructors actively join in the role-play, often challenging the student players and occasionally dissolving the activity into laughter.

Moving Up and Down the Steps: Rational Science

Students participate in a series of science practicums while they are camped out. They test empirical data against principles and scientific practice. Water testing is a significant component. Students provide data to the Ladder Ranch and over the years have established a long-term database to help

with water quality, wild fish restoration and the improvement of stream and riparian areas. They have the ability and the knowledge to affect the value of a reciprocal relationship with the environment through restoration. Chemical water quality testing is supplemented by stream and flow measurement, identification of insects and other activities that help create a whole picture of the health of the stream. The practicum goes on to assess range health and the learning of applied methodology for assessing grasslands, forests and other ecological areas with an eye to their health in relation to the total ecosystem and the animals that exist there, with special regard for restored and threatened animals.

Campfire nights provide special opportunities for students to learn and have fun as a community. Storytelling is popular and brings forth the opportunity for students and instructors to share appropriate cultural stories and experiences. One instructor has specialized knowledge of bats and his science-based presentation is particularly amazing because the Ladder Ranch and the camping area is home to several types of bats. He brings the bats in from a net and students have a rare close-up view of the animals before he releases them.

Moving Knowledge Around the Circle

The return to the Ranch's lodge is celebrated with a talent night that reflects cultural talents including language, music and fun. Social relationships bloom in the community as students and instructors come to know each other in new ways.

The process of learning in a circular motion through walks that integrate knowledge and learning with experience is translated into analysis. The next day, students take a big step in applying their knowledge to reveal values and cultural perspectives in a mock-policy process set within the National Environmental Policy workshop. A specially designed exercise where students explore their own impacts on the land over the last few days prepares them for larger environmental policy challenges. The next day, students divide into three groups to vie with three scenarios that encompass science, values and ethics. Students analyze practices for carrying out restoration activities and making decisions. They experience the interconnection of ideas

as they develop visions and strategies, solve problems, and communicate. Work and play are balanced on this day as students get to know each other and communicate their ideas and talent.

They develop amazing and creative positions as they engage with resolving issues and integrating scientific information with tribal cultural and political perspectives. They make presentations to the full group and offer alternatives. During this component practicum students communicate, deal with conflict resolution, and implement tribal perspectives to natural resource challenges. In this final exercise, they weave in the knowledge and practical skills they have gained in their experience of living in a restored landscape.

Rites of Passage: Here, Now, and Always

By the end of the Youth Practicum on the Ladder Ranch, students have built a common identity around the concept of respect and the ethic of restoration. Instructors, counselors and ranch staff all join in for a graduation ceremony. Students' achievements in science, fishing, the talent show, or as group leaders, are heralded and sometimes special presentations are made. Students often form long-term relationships with other students and instructors. Some return as student counselors in a few years, others cross paths in college or natural resource conferences as they proceed in their careers. Parents have called instructors later to note that the Youth Practicum functioned as a turning point in their children's lives. Memories are made and shared in understanding ecosystem restoration and cherished album pictures are shared with the Ladder Ranch.

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This work has been supported through the efforts of multiple educators and tribes, the Ladder Ranch and Turner Enterprises and some nonprofits. As a model for other regions, continued support is needed. Ideas for a youth education center, better science equipment and outreach must eventually be met. The need to restore each other and create sustainable restored landscapes engages the future, the present and the past.