

The Wrangell Mountains Center's College Field Program

Student-Faculty Groups Engage Alaska Wilderness Issues in Rugged Terrain

BY BENJAMIN A. SHAINED

Introduction

Education that combines fieldwork with collaborative, applied research and writing can be done anywhere. But in the wild Wrangell Mountains, enormous scale and rapid rates of change make the experience especially vivid. Students in the Wrangell Mountains Center's college program find themselves in trailless terrain, both physically and for many wilderness issues, where alternatives remain unexplored and issues are yet unresolved. This setting rewards creativity and initiative. It also demands respect for its challenging realities.

The educational benefits of this program include, but go beyond, interdisciplinary study of natural history and land-use policy. Both the routes traveled and the projects undertaken create challenges that build community within the program. Because they have experienced it, participants come away knowing that cooperative living is possible in this world. The focus on hands-on fieldwork gives them an opportunity to integrate abstract thought with personal experiences. Through field journal entries, including drawing and creative writing as well as scientific observation and policy analysis, participants practice an attentiveness that serves them well in other situations. Above all, the land itself is the teacher, inescapably demonstrating the beauty and inevitability of natural processes and the necessity of adapting to them.

About half of the program occurs while backpacking. During the other half, students are based out of the center's historic headquarters, which was the McCarthy Hardware Store during the copper mining days of almost a century ago, a short walk from the Kennicott Glacier. Students, who come from campuses across the country (and sometimes

from other countries), earn academic credit through a partnership with University of California-Santa Barbara Extension's Wildlands Studies. Most are undergraduates ranging in age from 19 to 22, although graduate students and people in their 40s have enrolled. Research topics are developed in partnership with National Park Service staff and with the assistance of local scientists, writers, artists, and guides.

In 2003, the program went to the Chitistone-Skolai area of the park. Students inventoried significant attributes of the area, proposed interpretive themes, and described current and desired conditions and management issues for this most-visited part of the park backcountry. With Park Service support, students replicated an earlier inventory of trail and campsite conditions. Previous studies have inventoried and suggested criteria for evaluating backcountry conditions in the Kennicott Basin closer to McCarthy. Students and staff have also worked on a guide to the natural and cultural history of the Wrangell Mountains. This will be a multiyear project to which local residents and successive generations of students can contribute, resulting in a book published annually in revised editions. Partial funding has come through a cooperative agreement with the



Article author Ben Shaine lecturing at Kennicott Glacier in the Wrangell-St. Elais National Park and Preserve. Photo by Wrangell Mountains Center.



Figure 1—Both the routes traveled and the projects undertaken create challenges that build community within the program.
Photo by Wrangell Mountains Center.

Park Service, which, it is hoped, will be supplemented with foundation grants.

Administratively, the biggest challenge is maintaining the staff such a program requires. For safety as well as academics, in the field a student-staff ratio of 4:1 is preferred. It takes at least a year of experience in the place to prepare even a skilled person for a teaching position. Priority is placed on retaining staff, who often stay with the program for many years in varying roles. As a result, the staff consists of a combination of core faculty, who live together throughout the program, and guests, including those doing residencies at the center, along with local scientists, artists, guides, and park staff, who participate for shorter periods, often on a volunteer basis.

The year 2004 marks the center's 22nd annual summer season. All of the Center's programs share features developed in the college course: emphasis on hands-on experience with the place, community living, and empowering participants to take an active role in public life.

The Program Structure

The first part of the program is a structured introduction to the place, to living and travel skills, and to an array of academic disciplines. We introduce natural history journaling techniques with staff presentations, field exercises, and ensuing discussions. Using their journals as a primary tool, students develop their abilities in drawing, essay writing, poetry (especially the short forms of haiku and renga), Grinnell entries, and the hypothesis-testing scientific experimental method.

Days are devoted to studying topics such as ecological succession, rock identification, plate tectonics, and park history. These sessions are done on short walks from our McCarthy headquarters and on an initial backcountry trip to a base camp, usually one or two days' walk up the glacier from town. Teams of students are each assigned a question to study through observations during this trip and to report on to the group. Such questions might include, for example, "What evidence do we find on the land of previous glacial advances and what was their extent?" We also focus on hiking and camping skills. For some students, this trip is their first time camping, and likely none of them has dealt with terrain like the Wrangell Mountains before.

During the second part of the program, the students conduct field research. The itinerary for a two- to three-week wilderness trip is set to meet specific data-gathering and observation needs. We divide into backpacking groups of six to eight students and two staff, which may rendezvous near an

airstrip in the backcountry for resupply, academic discussion, storytelling, and an opportunity to meet with guest faculty and park staff.

We return to McCarthy for a week of project completion. Students first write up drafts, then give an oral presentation before an audience that includes center resident fellows, park staff, and local scientists. Using comments received in the presentation, students and faculty then together make revisions and create the final report, including text and illustrations, laid out and ready for printing. The learning curve during this period can be near-vertical; a student who starts the evening never having seen an executive summary may have written one for publication by midnight.

This schedule is intense. Over two months, students have only a couple of unscheduled days. We are still learning how to conduct the program so everyone, students and staff, stays within their comfort limits and maintains a sense of spaciousness in their lives. Each year, we do better.

The choice of project is critical. Although we have often had students do individual or small team projects, we find that they are most motivated when they work together as a group on a topic that is important to a large audience. Over time, we have discovered that the best topics call for extensive field work, are amenable to being broken down into tasks doable by subgroups of two to four, are simple enough to be completed with quality by inexperienced students in a few weeks, involve learning new skills, and have the potential to make an original contribution. In the Wrangell Mountains, there are many options that meet these criteria.

The program reflects a set of underlying principles that guide our agenda:

- *Embodiment:* Learning involves all the senses in direct contact with the

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place. Concepts provided by academic disciplines help enable this experience but are incomplete without it. Practical skills, including keeping warm in the rain, fording streams, and route finding, are also important. We learn through our muscles as well as our minds.

- *Community:* We explicitly value community living, including the joys of cooking, cleaning, and the daily maintenance required to live comfortably away from the support of modern utilities and urban infrastructure. While living and learning communities can exist on a college campus, the challenges of the Wrangell Mountains make it a much more intense experience, affecting how the members of the group experience not only their human relationships, but the place itself.
- *Collaboration:* We undertake projects that call for the efforts and talents of people working together toward a common objective. In this way, we prepare participants for civic and professional involvement with complex environmental and public policy issues, for working in interdisciplinary teams, and for functioning well with people of diverse viewpoints.
- *Cooperation:* The emphasis on cooperation, empathy, and compassion extends throughout the program, from mutual assistance in writing and rewriting report drafts to helping each other move through the country. When stronger participants reach a high pass, they are encouraged to drop their packs, go back down, and take loads from people still heading up from below. Slower hikers are encouraged to do their best, while seeing the yielding of their loads positively, as a gift to the group.
- *Discipline:* Taking on demanding projects in an unforgiving wilderness land makes it necessary to do

things well. For our seminars, we pick a limited number of readings, mostly from primary sources, which exemplify scholarly rigor and lucid presentation. Because they write for an outside audience that cares about the product, participants are motivated to achieve quality, even if it means editing 10 sloppy pages down to 1 tight paragraph. Camping in grizzly country and fording bridgeless glacial rivers makes an equivalent demand.

- *Engagement:* In both research projects and wilderness living, our practices demonstrate that individual and collective actions can make a difference in the outcome of events. Going into topics and places where few have tread before, our students discover that not only are they capable of taking care of themselves, but that they can make original, creative contributions that affect the future of a place they care about. Our intent is to empower them personally and as citizens to take responsibility for their actions. Doing so as an academic program, we approach policy questions in the spirit of inquiry, rather than as participants in political battles. While recognizing the importance of adversarial politics, we show that there are many ways to participate in public and community life.
- *Joy:* All of the above, done in the magnificence of the Wrangell Mountains, is cause for celebration. Our groups carry banjos into the wilds and sing while walking with Dall sheep and mountain goats through sun, rain, and mosquitoes.

While recognizing the value of solitude and leisure in the wilds, we acknowledge that our program does not provide much opportunity for it. However, our graduates can come away with skills and experiences that



Figure 2—The focus on hands-on fieldwork gives students an opportunity to integrate abstract thought with personal experiences. Photo by Wrangell Mountains Center.

enable them to venture to similar places on their own, with the freedom to choose their agenda.

The Challenge of the Wrangell Mountains

Together with the adjacent parks that comprise a World Heritage Site, extending through parts of Canada and down to Glacier Bay, Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve is the continent's preeminent example of a dynamic natural landscape. Far from equilibrium, its landforms and their biota often undergo change visible in the span of a human lifetime, or even a single season. Glaciers melt, rivers change courses, mountains slide. Change over longer time periods is starkly visible in contorted rock layers exposed in mountain cliffs. As the Grand Canyon is known for its monumental static geology, the Wrangell Mountains similarly demonstrate a land in transformation.

The protected area's size—13 million acres (5.3 million ha) in Wrangell-St. Elias and 24 million overall, including the contiguous areas of

the World Heritage Site—enables maintenance of natural habitat, species populations, and predator-prey relationships not possible in smaller parklands. Wilderness can be experienced on a scale not available elsewhere. Most overland travel is cross-country without trails; rivers and ridges are often impassable obstacles. Grizzly bears, rather than people, are often the top predators.

Paradoxically, the Wrangell Mountains are also a place where people not only visit, but live. Unlike most parks in the lower states, Wrangell-St. Elias has human residents with the experiences and perspectives that come from knowing a place as home. That home encompasses not only private lands within park boundaries, but the public lands as well. Whole small towns, such as McCarthy, are within park boundaries. Predating the park, they continue to grow and change. Other pri-


vate holdings, outside Park Service jurisdiction, most originally patented as mining claims, are scattered throughout the public lands.

Even in the backcountry of the nation's most rugged and largest designated wilderness, access is easier than in much smaller parks elsewhere. Park rules provide for motorized access. Air taxis land anywhere physically possible in the park, dropping visitors off at remote sites. Snow machines and motorboats are currently unregulated.

Two decades after Congress designated the park, many complexities arising from this paradox remain unresolved. The Park Service is just now making tentative steps toward its first backcountry plan. It has embarked on its first interpretive plan, which explicitly recognizes ongoing human residence along with natural and wilderness values. With a small staff

responsible for management of an area the size of Switzerland, the agency is but one player among many, including the state of Alaska, Native-owned corporations, and private individuals, who participate in defining its future.

Similar to the legal and regulatory situation, the expectations, images, and understandings people have about the park remain fluid and subject to change. Accessible sources of information are few, especially given the huge size and diversity of the area. As a result, a vision that would provide a foundation for the direction of park management remains relatively unformed. Over time, understanding of park values and purposes will become clearer. Meanwhile, there is great opportunity to influence the ways that the park is perceived and, thus, how it is treated. These conditions provide the context for our field program. The opportunities are as great as the challenges.

Quite a few alumni have returned to the Wrangell Mountains in subsequent years. Some have returned to complete fieldwork for undergraduate and graduate theses in landscape architecture, anthropology, and natural sciences. Others have moved to Alaska after finishing college. Some have established homes in the McCarthy area, worked as backcountry guides, or joined our staff. Whether or not they return to the Alaska wilderness, participants leave the Wrangell Mountains seeing their own home place in a different light. We hope they return home to discover that the natural wildness so obvious in the Wrangell Mountains in reality exists everywhere, even if obscured by civilization's overlay. 

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CI has a long-standing commitment to wilderness conservation, in particular in the high-biodiversity wilderness areas. As evidenced by its leadership in a number of large-scale wilderness protection initiatives in Amazonia, New Guinea, and Congo, not to mention a comprehensive survey of the planet's wilderness areas ("Wilderness:

Earth's Last Wild Places"—see article in *IJW*'s August 2003 issue, and book review by John Shultis, *IJW*, April, 2004), CI's commitment to wilderness conservation continues to grow.

"CI is very pleased to be part of the *IJW* and its constituency," said Dr. Russell Mittermeier, CI's president. "The organizations responsible for this high-quality and timely journal are key players in an active and critically important wildlands debate in international conservation."

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