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Classroom on the Mountain

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Classroom on the mountain



Peter Schoonmaker

Gabriel Del Rayo '08 grasps a push pin as he crouches over a tree stump. Squinting in the bright sun, he carefully begins to count the number of rings, a painstaking process that will determine the age of the tree and indicate previous forest fires.

The odor of charred wood still hangs in the air three years after the B&B Complex fire burned 92,000 acres in the Deschutes and Willamette National Forests near the resort town of Sisters. Tree trunks are covered with blackened bark that rubs off at the touch of a hand and walking can be treacherous over the loosened soil. The wind can howl down the denuded hillsides, grinding dirt and ash into unprotected skin and making work an exhausting challenge. But it can also be exhilarating, as 11 Linfield College students will attest. In June, they spent five days in the burn area in the Deschutes National Forest learning about the history of fire in the Cascade Mountains and helping launch a fledgling research project. The course, Fire History of the Cascades, is one of several summer travel courses offered through Linfield's Division of Continuing Education.

Instructor Peter Schoonmaker covers the science of forest fires and how science and politics guide national fire policy. The students get hands-on experience assessing the impact of fire. Depending on the outcome of the

study, they may also get to influence plans for restoration as well as future state and federal fire policy regarding forest management.

"They get a real feel for the controversy about forest fire," Schoonmaker said. "They develop an understanding – from the ground up – that this is a more complicated issue than just what they see in the news."

With the burn area in its second growing season, Linfield students received a varied look at forest ecology. Much of their work centered on marking circular plots within a section of the burn area that had not been logged. Once the plots were marked, they combed the area – sometimes on hands and knees – counting the saplings that have begun growing. That data was entered into a computer program that compares growth rates between salvaged and non-salvaged areas.

The project is similar to a controversial study produced by an Oregon State University graduate student earlier this year, which concluded that forests will regenerate faster without salvage logging. Schoonmaker wanted to see if that hypothesis held up in another area. Once he has preliminary data, he'll meet with foresters at the Sisters Ranger District to determine if the study is worth pursuing.

The intensity of the class surprised Tim Sackett '07, a business systems analyst for Freightliner.

"In a very short time we got hands-on experience doing what people like Peter do for a living," he said. Not only did Sackett learn about the interactions and interdependency between forest health and fire ecology,



Mike Marshall '06, left, and Tim Sackett '07 crawl on a steep hillside, counting the saplings in their plot.



Gabriel Del Rayo '08 counts the number of rings on a tree stump to determine its age and whether it had been damaged by fire previously.



Although the ground cover and saplings have begun growing in the B&B Complex burn area, the dead trees are a stark reminder of the fire three years ago. Jennifer Larson '07 marks one of the trees to set the boundary of the plot she and her classmates will survey.

he also learned about the difficult and sometimes conflicting issues of lumber and development versus recreation and wildlife habitat.

“(Foresters) are assigned enormous spans of acreage that include great diversity,” he said. “It takes years to understand all of the different considerations of terrain, climate and wildlife.”

The students came from both the Adult Degree Program (ADP), where students pursue their bachelor’s degrees while working full time, and from McMinnville’s more traditional-age student population.

Mike Marshall ’06 of Chehalis, Wash., an environmental studies minor working on his degree through ADP, is a logistics manager for a wood products firm. His father was a forester for Boise Cascade, and Marshall spent a great deal of time in the forest while growing up. He was interested in getting a broader knowledge about the product his company ultimately puts out.

“The majority of what we manufacture is made from Douglas fir and Western larch,” he said. “Here I can study the species and its climate and get a better understanding of why it is so dominant.”

Del Rayo, a business major on the McMinnville campus, took the class to explore a different field.

“I learned the effects of wildfires in ecosystems and how they play a big role in saving forests. Thinning forests to reduce fuel buildup can make a big difference,” he said. “It was a fun class because I could see for

myself how things are really done.”

The best part of the class was the chemistry among the students, said Chris Hukill ’09 from Monmouth, who works full time at Hewlett-Packard.

“We really bonded,” Hukill said. “Everyone had an attitude that fostered good learning and took it seriously. Everyone had respect for the learning and respect for the knowledge people brought to the class. It was good to have the diversity of ages.”

Schoonmaker is the founding board president of Illahee, a non-profit organization that provides a forum for environmental innovators to exchange ideas and increase the scientific rigor of public discourse about the environment in the Pacific Northwest. He has worked with conservation organizations, government agencies and natural resource businesses to craft mutually beneficial forest, fisheries and watershed partnerships throughout the region.

Schoonmaker likes teaching field-based classes, where a question is posed and the students pursue an answer in the field, instead of the class being defined by a text.

“In the course of asking a question, the students usually have to tackle all those things they see in a text and I think they learn it better,” he said. “They are learning the theory holistically, in a hands-on way and I think at the end of the class they see the whole picture.”

– *Mardi Mileham*



Linfield instructor Peter Schoonmaker explains a point to the students after recording the number of rings on a stump. He prefers teaching field-based classes which approach a subject holistically and give students hands-on experience.