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# Wilderness and Civilization

## Two Decades of Wilderness Higher Education at the University of Montana

By Laurie Yung, Bob Yetter,  
Wayne A. Freimund, and Perry J. Brown

“Environmental reform, indeed the survival of the present ecosystem, ultimately depends on changing human values. The responsibility for higher education is clear.”

—Roderick Nash

IT'S A COLD CRISP DAY in the Ninemile Valley, and the snow hangs on branches of trees in winter silence. Twenty-five students gather around wolf biologist, Mike Jimenez, as he discusses wolf ecology and the history of wolves in this valley. The Ninemile Valley is also home to the Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center. This is where these students spent the morning learning the process by which the United States Department of Interior (USDI) Bureau of Land Management (BLM) wilderness recommendations are currently being made in Utah. The valley lies just 30 miles west of Missoula, Montana, and the students are part of a unique education program, Wilderness and Civilization, at the University of Montana.

### The Wilderness Institute

Wilderness and Civilization is part of the Wilderness Institute (WI), the 23-year-old wilderness center of the School of Forestry at the University of Montana. This institute was created in the wake of the 1974 conflict over designation of federal roadless areas. Partly in response to this controversy, a group of 19 scientists, educators, land managers, and conservationists met in May 1974 to create an organization to meet current wilderness challenges. WI was officially established in 1976 to mediate wild-land conflict and address issues of wilderness allocation and the newly emerging profession of wilderness management.

WI is appropriately situated in Missoula, Montana, amidst some of the wildest country in the lower 48 states, surrounded by 5 million acres of public wildlands. Missoula is also a center of wilderness excellence, the location of the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute, the Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center, and numerous wilderness advocacy organizations.

WI seeks to meet current wilderness challenges through programs of education, research, and information dissemina-



Learning in the field leaves a lasting impression. Photo by Bob Ream.

tion. In the last two decades WI projects have dealt with a variety of topics, from wilderness management and recreation issues, to allocation and public and student education. In the late 1970s the institute drafted the proposal for the Mission Mountain Tribal Wilderness, established by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes as the first designated wilderness on tribal lands (see related article, *IJW* vol. 1, no. 1, p. 20). In the area of public and university wilderness education, the Wilderness Issues lecture series has served as a forum for the exploration of current wilderness issues for 17 years. WI is presently developing a Wilderness Information Network and facilitating the delivery of the Wilderness Management Distance Education Program (see *IJW* vol. 1, no. 3 and *IJW* vol. 2, no. 2 for articles on these projects).



The fall backpacking trip in the Bob Marshall Wilderness. Photo by Bob Ream.

## The Wilderness and Civilization Program

WI's flagship educational project is Wilderness and Civilization. In 1971 its predecessor, the Round River Experiment, was established to facilitate hands-on wilderness education for undergraduate students. Named after

ness and Civilization, currently a year-long wilderness studies program leading to an undergraduate wilderness studies minor. Wilderness and Civilization is an interdisciplinary, classroom, and field-based immersion program. Certainly one of the first of its kind in the nation, it remains unique to this day.

## The 45 days that students spend in the field make abstract concepts and ideas real, and provide the context for study of specific management and land use issues, ecological concepts, and natural history.

Aldo Leopold's essay "The Round River," it followed his education philosophy. In this essay Leopold calls for a "reverse of specialization; instead of learning more and more about less and less, we must learn more about the whole biotic landscape" (1953). The idea was to give students broad-based exposure to wilderness from a variety of disciplines.

A few years later the Round River Experiment became Wilder-

ness and Civilization. As the program title implies, Wilderness and Civilization is not just about wilderness, it looks at wilderness in the context of modern society. It explores the individual, community, and societal relationships with the wild. The goals of the Wilderness and Civilization program are to increase knowledge of environmental and ecological issues, especially those related to wilderness, wildlands, and wildlife; to instill understanding and appreciation of humankind's

relationship with the natural world; to encourage responsible action in order to bring about meaningful change and problem-solving; and to cultivate wildland values in the individual and in society as a whole.

Courses focus on presenting different wilderness perspectives. Through exposure to a variety of viewpoints, students develop their personal wilderness values. In short, although one focus of Wilderness and Civilization is on wilderness and wildlands, these topics are also the backdrop for the exploration of each student's individual land ethic.

When David Orr (1994), author of *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment and the Human Prospect*, calls for the re-design of education, he argues that the compartmentalization of academic disciplines is a central problem. According to Orr, because "we experience nature mostly as sights, sounds, smells, touch, and tastes—as a medley of sensations that play upon us in complex ways," education about the natural world should be similarly structured.

Now preparing for its 22d year, Wilderness and Civilization combines courses from the humanities, ecological and social sciences, and management with hands-on field experiences. Students explore wilderness from cultural, historical, managerial, scientific, philosophical, and political points of view. The truly interdisciplinary nature of Wilderness and Civilization is one of the program's key strengths.

### Applying the Knowledge

Wilderness and Civilization has a longstanding commitment to experiential education and application of knowledge to the real world. Recent understanding of learning supports the notion that concepts, when applied or experienced, are often better understood and retained than if they are just heard. Two major avenues for this application in Wilderness and Civilization are internships and fieldwork. Students are required to work with community organizations on a wildland project through a spring internship. This provides an opportunity to gain hands-on problem-solving experience with real-life wilderness challenges.

Field experiences are also a central element of the learning process. Wilderness and Civilization begins and ends with extended backcountry trips and takes advantage of its location with a variety of short field trips. The 45 days that students spend in the field make abstract concepts and ideas real, and provide the context for study of specific management and land use issues, ecological concepts, and natural history. For many students, the 10-day trip at the beginning of the Wilderness and Civilization program is their first extended outing in a remote area. It provides a point of reference for further study and creates a sense of community among students, faculty, and staff, which continues to develop throughout the program.

### **Learning Outcomes in an Immersion Program**

The community aspect and group dynamics of Wilderness and Civilization serve to facilitate the learning experience. Because students go through the program as a group, certain group dynamics develop. In a recent survey, program alumni cited community structure as one of the top five valuable components of the Wilderness and Civilization experience.

The atmosphere of cohesion and community that evolves as result of the intensity of the program has tangible learning outcomes. Supported by their cohorts, students can be creative in problem solving, take intellectual risks, and learn to work on group projects effectively. Students enrolling in Wilderness and Civilization might be ranchers, recreationists, or writers from Virginia, Montana, or Japan. They might be majoring in art, wild-life biology, journalism, or any other discipline.

A large proportion of program alumni now work in conservation and carry titles such as land manager, conservationist, outdoor educator, and organic farmer. Surveys indicate that alumni not employed as environmental professionals use their well-developed land ethics in their daily lives, and a majority of them stay involved in wilderness conservation.

## **Wilderness and Civilization Program Courses: A Sampling**

Issues in Wilderness Ecology  
Wilderness and Expression (Drama)  
Wildlands Community Project (Internship)  
Ecological Perspectives in Native American Traditions  
Beauty, Ethics, and the Environment  
Economics of Wildland Preservation  
Conservation of Wilderness, Wild Rivers, and National Parks  
Environmental Ethics  
Natural Resource Law

### **Alumni and Instructors on Wilderness and Civilization**

"The broad spectrum of classes and the interdisciplinary nature of the program are what made Wilderness and Civilization unique. Take science or humanities classes by themselves and you may not make the connections, but taking them together in a program such as this forces you to make certain connections."

—Peter Neilsen, Environmental Health Supervisor  
Missoula City/County Health Department, Missoula, Montana  
1980 Wilderness and Civilization student

"My Wilderness and Civilization experience has been critical to who I am and the sorts of things I am pursuing today. It established an intellectual framework regarding Nature and our human relationship to it. My teachers and fellow students inspired and encouraged me to take an active stand for my ideals, and I saw that energetic, dedicated people really can make a difference. I saw that love of Nature is a real force, with power to change oneself, and possibly the World."

—Mollie Yoneko Matteson, writer  
1985 Wilderness and Civilization student

"Wilderness and Civilization is about the community of all beings. The idea that human maturity means the growth of our ability to actualize the relatedness of all beings (this as a primary responsibility of being fully human) is at the core of our efforts in this program."

—Roger Dunsmore, professor emeritus,  
Liberal Studies Department  
Wilderness and Civilization instructor, 1975 to present



Backcountry travel bonds students, staff, and faculty. Photo by Bob Ream.

## Informing Wilderness Advocates

More than ever, we are recognizing wilderness as an integrating concept for

many values and disciplines. As our culture focuses more on issues of technology and consumption, the values of wilderness are increasingly pronounced, scarce, and threatened. The

WI is committed to applying the breadth of resources available in the university to wilderness issues. The Wilderness and Civilization program uses the wilderness concept within the context of today's rapidly changing society, leading to informed wilderness advocates in many of society's roles. **IJW**

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