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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AT CALIFORNIA POLYTECHNIC STATE UNIVERSITY'S SWANTON PACIFIC RANCH

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ABSTRACT: Swanton Pacific Ranch (SPR) is a 3,200-acre fully operational ranch, including forested lands, located 12 miles north of Santa Cruz, California, and 200 miles north of the California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo main campus. Even though the property is 200 miles from the main campus, it is used extensively for experiential learning activities. SPR was first established as a Mexican land grant in 1843. Since that time, it has had several owners and has been a dairy, and had several agricultural operations including growing crops, such as artichokes, brussels sprouts, and also cattle operations. The area was logged from 1905-1923 to rebuild San Francisco after the earthquake and fire in 1906. In the 1930s it was Boy Scout camp. Albert Smith began buying what is now Swanton Pacific Ranch in 1943. In 1986 he entered a cooperative lease agreement with Cal Poly for use by College of Agriculture students for “learn by doing” activities. In 1993, when Al Smith passed away, he left the Ranch to Cal Poly. His goal was “to see this place kept intact and natural, a lab and a classroom for the college of Agriculture for ‘learn by doing.’” For more information on the history of Swanton Pacific Ranch, please refer to their Web page (www.spranch.org). SPR is made up of approximately 125 acres of irrigated land, 1,900 acres of rangeland, and 500 acres of redwood and Douglas-fir forests.

The distance of 200 miles between Swanton Pacific Ranch and Cal Poly’s main campus does not preclude it from being used for experiential learning. The ranch is used for class field trips, internships, enterprise projects, research projects, and student clubs. SPR has bunkhouse style accommodations for 14 interns. There are also two 30-foot yurts that are used for class field trips. Ranch style houses are used as office space and for additional lodging.

Over twenty courses from the College of Agriculture and across campus use the property for class field trips. Several classes from the Natural Resources Management Resources use the ranch annually. These classes include forest harvesting and utilization, mensuration, silviculture, forest health, timber management and watershed. SPR is also used by classes from soil science, animal science, crop science, and English. The ranch also has distance learning facilities, which are used to transmit courses both from, and to the ranch.

Interns (24 annually) can be found at SPR year round from several different majors and emphasis areas across the campus. Interns participate in all aspects of ranch management and thus play an important part in the management of the ranch, and at the same time they experience the true “learn by doing” aspect that has always been a mission of Cal Poly. These internships are paid positions. Some of the hours worked are to pay for room and board on the ranch. The interns work in many different aspects of ranch management, including activities related to forestry, hydrology, animal care, animal science, watershed and hydrology, and general agriculture. All interns participate in several areas of ranch management and play a very important role in the management of the ranch.

SPR is also used by student organizations. For example, the Logging Sports Team has built a competition area in 1999. After completing the competition arena, they hosted the Association of Western Forestry Clubs logging conclave in which over 200 students competed. They have also hosted two California conclaves.

Enterprise projects in which student clubs or individual students can earn money also take place on the ranch. For example, the Stocker enterprise project involves 15-20 students annually. Students help to raise and care for the cattle and in the selling of the cattle.

At any given time, there are several students working on senior projects or working with faculty members of research projects. Research projects on the ranch currently include development of volume equations, growth and yield modeling, pine pitch canker research, water quality, and a paired watershed project.

As can be seen from the above-mentioned activities, SPR is an incredible resource for Cal Poly, and it is extensively used by faculty and students for experiential learning activities. Students enjoy the learning experiences they have at the ranch and do not mind having to travel over three hours for these experiences.