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Teens go wild for nature

North Cascades Institute program puts urban youth in close touch with nature

By Franny White

ROSS LAKE — It didn't matter that they'd just spent the past six days hiking, canoeing and swinging heavy woodsmen's tools.

Ignoring physical fatigue, the nine teenagers were full of energy and optimism Thursday as they sat aboard the Ross Mule, a barge-like boat that North Cascades National Park staff use to traverse Ross Lake in the northeastern end of the park. The participants in North Cascades Institute's North Cascades Wild — an outdoor education program for youth — explained how nature has transformed them in a matter of days.

"This is the first time I've been in a real wild place," said 16-year-old Hikmatullah Arif, who immigrated to Seattle from central Pakistan in 2000 with his family. Overlooking the lake's jade green waters and shorelines plush with tall evergreen trees, he recalled how his Pakistani town was littered with garbage. His home country could be a more beautiful place, he said, if only its residents took better care of it.

"When I came here to this camp, I started thinking about this stuff," Arif said. "I've learned a lot." The 36 teens who participate in one of the four North Cascades Wild sessions each summer are mostly immigrants, members of low-income households or minorities. The program offers an opportunity that would normally be out of reach for them — free immersion in the natural beauty of Ross Lake for 10 days. Although all participants this year are from the Seattle area, Skagit Valley teens may be invited to join the program next summer.

The first day or two is challenging, the youths said, as they adapt to the physically demanding labor of building trails and tent platforms for the lake's many camping visitors. Soon enough, though, they begin to enjoy having starry skies as an endless nighttime ceiling and using a large, open lake for a refreshing bath.

Appreciating the forest's bounty is just the first step. After learning the area's natural and cultural history and how to identify a number of native plants, group leaders talk

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Eden Garcia, 16, of Seattle is one of more than 60 underserved high school students who studied outdoor and leadership skills, stewardship and the natural and cultural history of the North Cascades through the Institute's unique program.

of how human consumption endangers the seemingly pure land, water and air around them. This realization causes participants to ask themselves some tough questions.

"God put us as stewards of the land, and we're not," said an overwhelmed Rachel Sacco, 16, of Shoreline, her eyes welling with tears. Looking up from a journal she'd been keeping that week, she said: "That's what I've learned — to restore what we've done. And that was incredible to me because I've never realized that before."

Such realizations are what the nonprofit North Cascades Institute aimed for when it started the program last summer. In an era when children are more likely to play video games than play outside, North Cascades Wild attempts to offer disadvantaged youths a chance to connect with the environment. Some participants said they lived in cities their entire lives and had never seen the stars nor eaten food cooked over an open flame.

"In our culture today, we don't really see our connection with the natural world," said North Cascades Wild Program Coordinator Amy Brown. "And yet, we are inherently dependent on it," pointing out that about 17 percent of Seattle's electricity comes from Seattle City Light's three hydroelectric dams on the Skagit River.



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More than nature, participants said that the program allowed them to discover themselves.

Tumen Erdenebat, 16, a Mongolian immigrant living in Seattle, learned how to cook for the first time. The night before he made a meal of macaroni and cheese for the group. And Alexis Myricks, 15, of Shoreline, who started out the week not liking dirt, said constructing tent platforms taught her she was stronger than she realized.

"I have so much more upper body strength than I thought," said Myricks, wearing a T-shirt with sleeves proudly rolled to her shoulders. "I'm learning that I'm not as girly as I thought I was and that I stereotype myself."

Leading the enthusiastic group on a boat tour of Ross Lake on Thursday, longtime park employee Gerry Cook said the dynamism of the participants encourage him.

"I'm very concerned about the plight of the planet," Cook said. "I thirst for hope, and those kids are the one thing that gives me some hope... When they leave here, we send out stewards for the planet."

Continuing the message of care and stewardship is a major focus for North Cascades Wild. Jeff Giesen, program director for the Institute, said the program "is not an isolated, 10-day experience," but a gradual, long-term change.

In the fall, parents of the participants are invited to come back with their children to see the power of nature first-hand.

On Thursday, 16-year-old Arif said that when he returned to Seattle, he wanted to share what he'd learned with family and friends.

"I want to help the community be a better place, a cleaner place," Arif said. "It's our home."



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Long-time National Park Service employee Gerry Cook inspires North Cascades Wild students to be stewards of the environment at Little Beaver campground on Ross Lake.