

Students hike in Wash., learn about climate change

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NORTH CASCADES NATIONAL PARK, Wash. — In the remote wilderness of northwest Washington, teenagers trekked to a glacier to learn about ice melt and snorkeled in a mountain reservoir to count threatened fish.

The National Park Service, North Cascades Institute and National Parks Foundation organized the intensive, 30-day workshop to show 20 high school students from around the country how climate change is affecting parks and to encourage them to be involved in the efforts to combat it in the future.

The students traveled from metropolitan areas in Chicago, Washington D.C., Denver, Seattle and California's Napa Valley to North Cascades National Park, a vast, undeveloped wilderness of craggy mountain peaks and diverse wildlife, where they spent the past month. The goal is to inspire young people to embark on conservation projects back in their hometowns, then to travel to the other Washington to share what they've learned with federal officials and members of Congress.

"The idea was to try to recruit kids who have already been demonstrating in their communities that they make things happen," North Cascades National Park Superintendent Chip Jenkins said. "We're bringing them to one of their national parks to learn and engage them to take action."

In the debate over climate change, the nation's parks have been relatively quiet in recent years. But that's beginning to change as they, like all federal agencies, come under orders to reduce energy and gasoline use. Many have committed to measuring their carbon emissions and coming up with plans to curb them, as well as to educate the public on what they can do to help.

So when the nonprofit National Parks Foundation offered to sponsor a youth program dedicated strictly to climate change - with money from several corporate sponsors - North Cascades agreed to host the students. The park's biologists took turns stepping in as teachers and guides, while staff members of the nonprofit North Cascades Institute shepherded the kids through the trip.

National parks may be nailing down the science for monitoring climate change, but they're still trying



to figure out how to handle outreach, said Matt Ferris, the foundation's program director of youth engagement.

"How do they get visitors to understand climate change and what parks are doing?" he said. "That, coupled with their need to connect with youth audiences, particularly urban audiences of diverse ethnicity, makes this program really timely and new."

Ferris said he's most eager to hear more about the students' plans for conservation projects back home. Some have talked about starting recycling programs in their schools. Other ideas include creating an educational video, board game or elementary school curriculum about climate change and the national parks.

Jordan Bell, a lanky 15-year-old junior from Washington D.C., already envisions a future for himself as an activist. The issue he cares most about is homelessness, but he said he now can see ways he might serve the homeless and the environment at the same time.

"Maybe I open a business where I can teach homeless people to make it on their own, producing wind turbines or solar panels," he said. "I want to take the world in a new direction."

Teachers recommended the students, who had to apply. For many of them, like 15-year-old Donya Borham of Washington D.C., the trip presented the first opportunity to camp, canoe or hike in the woods.

Borham found the canoeing fun, but the hiking challenging because "the mountains are so steep." Her family isn't all that aware of climate change, she said.

"When I was at home, I used to always encourage them to turn off the lights, but because I didn't want the bill to be high," she said. "Now that I know more about climate change, that's a bigger reason."

