

Nature camp for grown-ups at North Cascades Environmental Learning Center

North Cascades Institute offers popular outdoor getaways for adults, whose fees help finance the institute's youth education programs.

By Tan Vinh
Seattle Times staff reporter

DIABLO LAKE — The pitch was that we could canoe on the glacier-fed water, hike with park rangers and achieve serenity through downward dog. We could slouch in front of a bonfire underneath the stars. No “Kumbaya.”

The pitch was that we could also squirrel away in the lodge — by the cool lake and snowcapped peaks, staring at the six-point bucks wandering by our windows.

What in the name of Eden had I stumbled upon?

This was the North Cascades Environmental Learning Center, reached by a scenic drive along the upper Skagit River, where I had inquired about its conservation initiative and youth nature classes.

Instead, I also found nature-photo retreats for adults and fly-fishing getaways specifically for women; snowshoe excursions and canoe trips; mushroom foraging and bird-watching.

The center's operator, North Cascades Institute, may be about youth nature classes, but it has stumbled upon its own sort of dirty little secret: Programs with sexy titles such as “Landscape Watercolor Workshop” and “Searching for Kerouac in the North Cascades” help pay the bills.

In the last two years, the nonprofit has added more adult seminars, weekend retreats and family getaways to subsidize its youth programs.

Despite little publicity, those adult and family programs often sell out months in advance, with waiting lists.

The reality is that the institute must be self-sustaining, said Saul Weisberg, its founder and executive director. A balance is needed between the youth programs “and the adult programs, which are designed to bring in revenue and support the kids.”



Diablo Lake's turquoise color comes from fine glacial silt flowing in from Thunder Creek.

A rare lodging option

In 1986, Weisberg, then a North Cascades park ranger, and his college buddies formed the institute. They hosted three-day trips around the Cascades, with families and couples camping and cooking their own meals while exploring the wilderness and learning about conservation.

Three years later, Weisberg steered those wilderness programs more toward elementary- and high-school students, whom he feared were wedded to televisions and video games.

Weisberg, 54, of Bellingham, still pinches himself over how the institute has grown.

The nonprofit now manages the 16-building Diablo Lake complex, opened in 2005, with panoramic views of the Cascade Mountains and trails leading to mountain views and shoreline.

The remote campus is tucked off Highway 20, arguably the state's most scenic mountain drive. It's a rare lodging option in this protected wild country, part of Ross Lake National Recreation Area in the North Cascades National Park complex.

In a deal with the national park, Seattle City Light built this five-acre facility as part of its license to use the Skagit River for hydroelectric projects. The campus includes a

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library and mess hall, bedrooms and classrooms, allowing the institute to offer environmental classes, including programs for Western Washington University graduate students.

At its heart, the institute organizes dozens of youth trips, on which they might study insects and native plants. It leads teenage girls up Mount Baker to study glaciers and hosts all-expense, eight-day wilderness trips for low-income teens.

But the adult programs — day seminars, camping trips and lodge stays — have become a popular fixture.

Creature comforts

Administrators say the learning center has been a boon in luring thousands of city slickers to the Cascades.

The campus “allows us to reach people that we were not able to reach before. People who are older, people who do not want to camp, people who might be scared” of the wilderness, said Weisberg. “Now we got this place where people can hang out and come back [after hiking] and they can have a glass of wine or sit and read.”

Most do just that. “Family Getaways,” for instance, allow couples and mothers and daughters to canoe and hike with a guide, then return to a hot shower and bed at night. It’s the institute’s most popular program. (Interested families should sign up now since space for next summer’s getaways are filling up already.)

The campus sits on the north shore of Diablo Lake. An occasional station wagon will crackle through the pebble path as guests drop off luggage. Otherwise, vehicles aren’t allowed on campus.

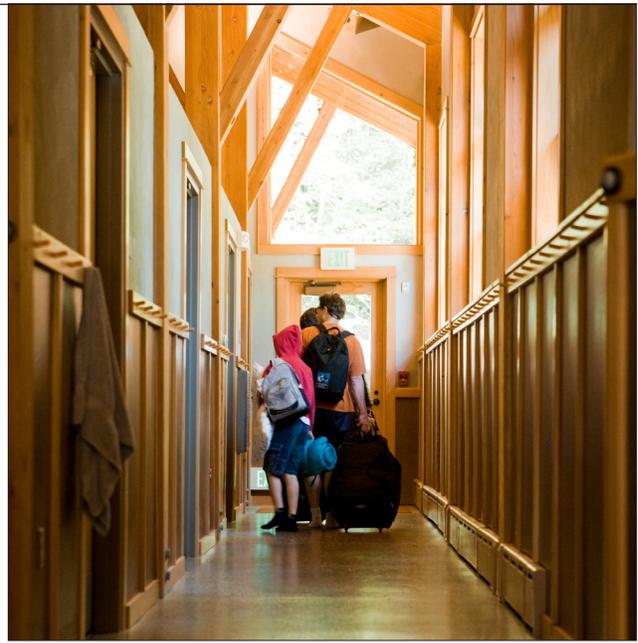
You can hear critters and ravens in the ring of towering Douglas firs surrounding the campus. Deer wander by so often that some staffers don’t even bat an eye to acknowledge them. It’s more summer-camp ambience than Club Med. Bedrooms feature bunk beds. Bathrooms are down the hall.

Canoes, hikes, downtime

On a recent weekend, we followed about 50 guests who had enrolled in a popular program called “Diablo Downtime,” a three-day retreat filled with yoga, canoe trips (on two-person and 14-person boats) and hikes, some strenuous, some not.

That first evening, shorts-clad guests gathered on a deck and mingled over chilled white wine, prosciutto and antipasto bought from a nearby farm, followed by a sunset stroll to Diablo Dam, the tallest dam in the world when it was built in 1930.

Quite a sight: The dam’s art-deco arches and lampposts.



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Each guest room features both twin and bunk beds, desks, an internet connection and wardrobes.

The crimson sky outlining snow-white peaks. Below, the icy blue-green water, which gets its odd hue from glacial sediments.

The next morning, two guides led a bunch of coffee-fueled guests on canoes.

We canoed by Sourdough Mountain, where poet Gary Snyder once served as a fire lookout, then past Monkey Island, where chimpanzees were set loose during the 1930s as a tourist attraction.

I doubt many paddlers heard that quirky story. Many were on their own island of a sort, sunbathing in their canoes or eyeing the water for a trout to jump.

On land, a few opted for a nine-mile hike on the Diablo Lake Trail. I said a few.

Most meandered around the learning-center campus — lying on yoga mats in savasana, tracking medicinal native plants on a guided hike or chatting with the institute’s chef about slow-food icon Alice Waters.

By night, the socks-and-sandal clad guests hovered around a bonfire, listening to backcountry adventures and reciting poetry.

A young staffer took out her violin and headlamp, along with some sheet music. We only saw her silhouette but recognized her rendition of “Ashokan Farewell,” the theme from Ken Burns’ “The Civil War.”

No one moved nor uttered a word. They wanted to savor the moment on their last night at Diablo.

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