

## Where learning comes naturally

The North Cascades Institute has been building naturalists for two decades

By Levi Pulkkinen

DIABLO — After almost three days in the high alpine woods of the North Cascades, 10-year-old Caitlin Gaylord had a lot to think about.

Caitlin, her mother, Lauren Gaylord of Seattle, and about 50 others had been reintroduced to nature by a team of North Cascades Institute staffers and National Parks Service rangers in two activity-packed days.

They canoed, walked and wandered through a small chunk of Washington's roughest mountains. They wrote poetry, learned botany and were fleetingly acquainted with a mother bear.

They'd grown a little closer to the natural world.

Like many families that attended the institute's family getaway earlier this month, the Gaylords hoped the three-day adventure at the nonprofit institute's Diablo Lake Learning Center would help them learn about the larger world, Lauren Gaylord said.

On that count, Lauren and her daughter were more than satisfied.

"This is a place where you can learn about the environment," Gaylord said. "You can see it and touch it and feel it."

That kind of intimate contact with nature was what Saul Weisberg and three college buddies aspired to promote when they formed the North Cascades Institute in 1986.

The idea was to introduce people to the North Cascades — their beauty and wildlife — and inspire them to protect



Mountain School students examine local geology with Matt Burns.

and enjoy them, Weisberg said. They might even choose to become naturalists, he added.

"People have got to care," he said. "And I think, when you get them outside and connected with the natural world... where they're not so plugged in, they start to care."

### 'A bright future'

Twenty years ago, Weisberg and the other founders living in the Northwest had been working for outdoor programs scattered around the country. Weisberg said they finally decided it was "crazy" to keep leaving the region they loved to show people the great outdoors elsewhere.

That's when they banded together to create their own base for wildlife education and exploration.

Since the institute was launched, it has grown into a multimillion-dollar operation serving more than 10,000 participants a year. This year, it boasted more than 52 offerings, ranging from geologic kayak explorations of Samish Bay to photography seminars in Stehekin.

Scott Russell Sanders, author of "A Private History of Awe" and other books, taught at one of the Institute's annual offerings, the Nature Writing Retreat.

The experience showed him that the institute's programs help people see themselves as part of the larger natural world, Sanders said.

"We need to reimagine ourselves as one species alongside millions of others, wholly dependent for our well-being on the health of the biosphere," Sanders said. "The North Cascades Institute offers the ideal combination of



A gravel path connects buildings at the North Cascades Institute's Environmental Learning Center at Diablo Lake. The Seattle City Light-funded facility opened in June 2005 and serves as the Institute's base of operations much of the year.

setting, staff, and vision to carry on this work.

The center first offered programs geared toward adults, Weisberg said. Those programs, which primarily focused on Northwest history, environmental sciences and art, were well-received, he said. But they weren't achieving the institute's larger goal of conserving the Northwest's wild places.

"If we were going to make an impact in terms of conservation, we needed to reach a wider audience, and a younger audience," said Weisberg, who has served as the institute's executive director since it was founded.

So organizers began launching a number of programs aimed at children, the largest being Mountain School.

Established in 1990, Mountain School offers classes for school-aged children as part of a week of environmental education at the Learning Center or a National Park campground in Newhalem. About 12,000 children have participated in the program.

The institute has teamed up with staff at the North Cascades National Park for those classes.

"Over the years, our partnership has strengthened and deepened as we work together in such award-winning programs as Mountain School and the planning and operation of the Environmental Learning Center," park Superintendent Bill Paleck said recently. "Clearly, our relationship has a bright future."

### Families 'meet themselves'

The institute's efforts were buoyed last June, when work was completed on the \$11 million Learning Center near Diablo Dam in the upper reach of the Skagit River.

The Seattle City Lightfunded center was designed to incorporate many of the ecological ideals promoted by the institute, center director Jeff Muse said. The 16-building complex is tucked away from the lakeside, and the buildings are clustered to create a feeling of community.

Muse said he sees the facility as a "gateway" to the North Cascades.

"You hear that people don't want to go to the National Parks any more," Muse said. "That hasn't been my experience. People see this as their backyard."

Bow-based naturalist Libby Mills said the institute's ecological offerings help people understand the needs of the wilderness and threats from humans. But rather than delivering gloomy – if sometimes needed – lectures on the ills of the world, instructors help participants learn about what can be saved.

"Without having those gutwrenching conversations, you can go out and get people in touch with how the natural world cycles things," Mills said. "Going out and being in



North Cascades Institute Executive Director Saul Weisberg holds a butterfly as instructor Libby Mills looks on.

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the wild for a weekend helps us realize that we're part of the planet, not just part of our house or our block."

Using the center as a base of operations, the institute has been able to launch a number of new programs this year, including free weekend hikes and canoe trips, and three-day family getaways, Muse said.

The latter, Muse said, is aimed at connecting families with the outdoors, and each other.

Small groups of 10 or so spend nearly every hour with their relatives, Muse said. Like the meals they're served, family members digest the lessons they've learned together.

A part of that digestion occurred for the Gaylords over a game of "Moths and Bat" in a gazebo erected on the web of nature trails emanating from the Learning Center.

During the game, three mothers, a sister and Parks Service ranger Paula Ogden-Muse linked hands circling four young girls as one ecstatic child – the "bat" – chased the other three with her eyes closed.

When the "bat" yelled, the others attempted to yell "moth."

Standing in solemn silence as the "bat" roamed the circle, Caitlin Gaylord seemed to enjoy the science-laced game of tag. But the talkative 10-year-old said she enjoyed the poetry writing sessions the most.

An aspiring writer, Gaylord said she'd written poems about leaves and rocks while spending some solo time in the woods the day before.

"I like it a lot up here," she said.

With 20 years of experience training naturalists, institute staffers are now in a position to decide what they're doing well and what they can do better, and pass that information on to other groups, Weisberg said.

"We have a role regionally and nationally on determining how do we help people do this same kind of work," he said.

In the meantime, he said, they'll keep making connections on the water and hills around Northwest Washington.