

COMMUNITY FORESTRY RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP FINAL REPORT  
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**COMMUNITY FORESTRY EDUCATION IN THE SWAN VALLEY, MT:  
CONTRIBUTIONS OF *NORTHWEST CONNECTIONS*' FIELD PROGRAM**

My research question examines the contributions of Northwest Connections (NwC) to community forestry in the Swan Valley watershed and specifically through its Landscape and Livelihood (LL) field educational program. LL was designed to have numerous opportunities for student participants to interact with community members for each to learn from each other. Some of my particular questions seek to understand how these interactions affected both populations in terms of ideas towards the intersection of rural livelihoods, local knowledge, drivers of forest change, (urban) narratives on all above, and ultimately community forestry efforts in the valley. I resided in the Swan Valley from July 2004 until October 2004. While living there, my field methods included the following: photography, interviews with community members and former LL students, pre and post qualitative surveys from current students, and personal reflections and observations based on interactions with current students and the Swan Valley community.

**Background**

Northwest Connections is a non-profit education organization located on the old Beck homestead near Condon, Montana. Their mission is to "assist land managers and private land owners in better understanding, conserving, and restoring critical habitats and habitat connections in the Swan Valley and surrounding areas" (Mission). In particular, Northwest Connections seeks "new ways to integrate local knowledge and conventional scientific processes in the conservation of Montana's rural forest lands" (Mission). More specifically, the founders distinguish local knowledge as being place-based knowledge where someone spends significant amounts of time through seasons and years, observing nature (M. Parker, personal communication, April 23, 2004). Landscape and Livelihood is seen by the founders as a way to re-orient ecological science by informing it with place-based knowledge, engaging local people in activities to promote land stewardship, employing local people, and trying to reduce land fragmentation across the watershed.

Landscape and Livelihood is a two-month field semester offered to undergraduate students with courses in biogeography, watershed dynamics, community forestry, and environmental education. Students also fulfill internship credits with freedom to choose a field of interest, skill, or job shadow. Due to the experiential nature of the program, students are not limited to the boundaries of the Beck homestead. In fact, students are encouraged to interact with the broader Swan Valley community. A key means to facilitate interaction is through the organization of students with host families known as "homestays." Students spend a weekend

residing with a volunteer family. In most cases, the students have not had exposure to rural Western families and culture (i.e., many come from out of state and/or urban backgrounds). The homestay experience is viewed by the LL organizers as a direct and informal way to break stereotypes on both sides and enable students to "live in the shoes" of rural community members for a brief period. As a group, students stay with families in the Blackfoot and Flathead Valleys. In the Blackfoot Valley, the group spends several days on a third generation ranch, where students assist in land conservation efforts on the land. During this time, students interact with local trappers, taxidermists, and a wildlife biologist involved with a local land conservation initiative, The Blackfoot Challenge. The students also spend several days with an independent logger in the Flathead Valley where they visit, among many places, restoration logging sites and a family-run mill.

In addition to the homestays, the LL program involves activities that speak to the program's larger involvement with the Swan Valley community and especially the role of rural residents contributing their time and experiential knowledge to ecological monitoring efforts. As part of NwC's larger monitoring program, students are taught to identify local plants and animals, their role in ecosystem processes, and techniques for collecting and recording data. They learn these methods through conducting a number of exercises, such as, the whitebark pine survey in the Swan mountain range. Students also conduct a stream survey with others from a monitoring team of another community-based conservation organization called the Swan Ecosystem Center. Community firewood gathering is another activity sponsored by NwC and provides an opportunity for students to interact with and lend a hand to local residents who need assistance in obtaining fuelwood. There are other activities students participate in that may not directly involve the community, but they are seen by NwC as skills that students may draw upon in the future should they choose to. Examples include animal tracking, field journaling, and first-aid. Throughout the semester, students interact and meet frequently in the field with federal employees and locals, whose livelihood is tied to land. These field trips are a place for students to hear their stories and see the forest through their eyes.

The research methodology draws heavily from participatory action research (PAR). Indeed the identification of my research question evolved out of conversations I have had with NwC founders and others in the Swan Valley. NwC founders had never instituted a formal evaluation of their LL program, neither for assessing its impact on student participants nor on the Swan Valley homestay families. NwC was interested in having me actually examine what multiple participants were thinking about their experience, and in particular, how their interactions and other activities were or were not contributing to what they and the literature were calling "community forestry." This research attempts to provide information on NwC and its link to other efforts in the Swan Valley to promote community forestry, but perhaps more importantly, it also raises questions and seeks to offer insights into educational processes for community forestry.

### **Field Experience and Participatory Action Research**

I identified four populations before beginning my fieldwork. They are as follows: current students (for the 2004 semester), former students, community members who have structured time with students, and community members who do not. As with any dynamic process such as PAR, I quickly discovered a pattern in which certain questions drew rich information and others

did not. It, therefore, became important for me to ask other less direct questions that may provide the information for the original question. This was more the case for community members than it was for students. I already had a rapport with the students, many of them having been former classmates. I quickly realized the importance of balancing a comfortable presence with accessible questions. In all interviews, I asked each person the same questions depending upon which population group they were categorized in.

Living in Condon, Montana and conducting PAR meant many things to me. Among the more obvious aspects of PAR, this experience *included* renting and living in a local resident's cabin. Staying on Anne Dahl's land was more than just paying the rent. We chopped wood together to prepare for winter, we walked the land together to pull noxious weeds, and we did household projects such as chimney sweeping and insulating her attic. Living with Anne also involved collecting raspberries from her garden to make jam and composting our food scraps. It meant spending evenings by the pond talking about what the community struggles with, her work as director of the Swan Ecosystem Center, and finding my place in the community as a researcher and short-term resident.

Another way I found myself emerging as a member of the community was through meals I shared with families who hosted students in their homestays. On one hand, this was a way for me to conduct interviews, but I also came to realize the process of my being there was part of their and my experience of integrating with the community on a personal level, not just as a researcher. Furthermore, the actual interview process, in many clear cases, became an extension of the experience they often described having with the students, that being a sense of energy renewal and surprise in my wanting to hear what they had to say.

In addition to interviewing host families, I also made an effort to interview people in the community who have less structured interaction with the students – community members who might participate in one of the activities such as fuelwood gathering or attend public meetings that LL students observe. The interaction may range from very little to significant depending on the circumstance. I was interested in interviewing this group to get a sense of what they may be experiencing and learning without the sort of impressions host families may acquire through direct, structured contact with NwC and the students.

Since my fieldwork also coincided with the 2004 LL field semester, I had the opportunity to offer the students a pre- and post-semester qualitative survey. It was also to my great advantage I was able to spend a meaningful amount of time with them. This included accompanying the students on a weekend field trip to the North Fork of the Flathead River where they toured an industrial lumber mill and a family-run, value-added mill as well as visited with a restoration logger and an elder logger.

For many of the students, they spent their “down” time participating with the community in some way. On many occasions, I accompanied them on small day projects. One included fuelwood gathering with Bud Moore, a local legend whose woodlot serves as a model for ecosystem management, and two community members who do not host students. These two community members served as key people to interview for the population that does not have structured time with students.

One of the immediate questions I developed in my fieldwork was asking who the community is in my research on “community forestry” in the Swan Valley. Who gets to decide and on what basis? Even the populations are not a homogenous group. Both are dynamic and do not easily fit into categories. I found through interviews a number of groups who represent a

community in themselves. I am especially interested in their points of intersection as they relate to the drivers of the community forestry movement in the valley.

The field experience also presented a challenge in finding creative ways to engage with the larger community, those not obviously connected with NwC or the Swan Ecosystem Center. In my 4 months there, I was fortunate to connect with several people who I was introduced to by the handful of people I already knew. These community members opened their homes to me, and I had a real sense of acceptance. We shared meals, and they showed me parts of the valley they thought were special. The friendships I developed through these connections added yet another rich layer to my time there, and I will be forever grateful for their openness to me.

### **Preliminary Findings**

It is important to emphasize that I have not completed the thesis for this research. I see this section of the final report as a space to explore emerging themes, while recognizing the thesis may yield very different findings and/or more nuanced findings based on further analysis.

Interviews with residents have not yielded specific examples for some of the themes identified as possible outcomes of interactions. For example, few community members identified shifts in their views on forest change after interacting with LL students. Some residents clearly stated that their views on forest change either remained unchanged or simply were affirmed by the interactions with the students.

Though there may be few specific examples identified so far, interviews with community members suggest the effect students have is a renewal of energy and a belief shift. For many, this shift deals with moving from general feelings of distrust toward young, often urban students to a level of acceptance and openness afforded to the students. How this affects their views on interactions with other academicians and scientists is still being explored. I will continue to examine how the energy renewal and belief shift translate into behavior as well as behavior related to community forestry.

The most obvious example of change in community forestry behavior identified by the community members themselves is increased interest and participation in LL activities. In several cases, residents expressed a renewed sense of vigor to continue participating in community-based initiatives such as the movement to establish a community forest in the Swan Valley.

Interviews with the founders of NwC and many community members revealed that both felt strongly there are multiple ways of knowing and learning, and that their experiential knowledge is not validated enough in professional forestry management and academia. They both expressed experiential knowledge and oral traditions are important sources of knowledge and stewardship practices. Specifically, storytelling is one form of teaching that connects personal experience, ethics, and intuition. Based on personal observations as well as conversations with the founders, an integral part of LL is providing opportunities for students to listen to the stories of ethically inspiring residents living in the area. I will continue to examine how this process of sharing stories and experience affect students and community members.

Most importantly, a consistent theme from most interviews is the community members' understanding of the broader picture LL and NwC fit into within the Swan Valley. When talking about their experience with LL students, residents generally frame it as it connects to their experience with other organizations in the Swan Valley, including the Swan Ecosystem Center, Northwest Connections, the U.S. Forest Service, and the greater Swan community. A major

finding is that most of the residents I interviewed see LL as related to other organizations and community forestry dynamics. They see them as all connected, influencing each other. The challenge for me is to probe this deeper to see how they connect to what I have been calling community forestry education.

Interactions with the current students yielded some interesting observations. In the space of the field semester, it was clear there was a shift in thinking for many students. One example is a student who entered the program with a strongly confrontational and cynical view toward the process for wilderness designation and ended the semester with a detailed description of how her internship (to study the dynamics of Wilderness designation in Montana) as well as other key experiences throughout the semester inspired a major shift in how she approached future work toward wilderness designation in her home-state. This shift included ideas of collaboration and moving away from a strictly science-focused argument for increased Wilderness. I believe this sort of observation is just the tip of the iceberg for what I may discover as I continue to examine, reflect upon, and interpret the data from my time with the current students. For other current students, the program seems to have affirmed what they believed and provided a more nuanced, focused understanding of rural communities and local knowledge.

As I continue to analyze interviews with former LL students, significant shifts in their views on factors driving forest change, rural livelihoods, and local knowledge continue to be affirmed. One student in particular stated that, though she may not know if LL will affect her choice about a career path, she was clear in understanding how the program shaped her ethics regarding more respect for multiple points of view and other forms of knowledge (other than empirical scientific forms), going on to say how this would be carried into whatever career she chooses, whether or not it involves natural resource issues.

An increasingly growing theme is the connectedness between place-based education and community forestry education, specifically discovering how NwC's form of place-based education also supports what appears to be community forestry education. How this is expressed in this specific context is something I am currently working on. So far, interviews with the former students are providing the richest data for this. Themes I have identified as of this writing that appear to support this are as follows: engaging with a community member in their context (their community) humanizes them and shows that issues and peoples' beliefs are not "black-and-white," rather there is a lot of "grey" comprised of opportunities for productive change; people who live and work on the land should be included in decisions regarding forest management; students feel a renewed sense of hope for the future of conservation and a personal sense of empowerment; and academia is important for certain kinds of knowledge, but there are also other more "traditional" forms of knowledge that is an integration of skills, stories, and history facilitated through the interactions with people living on the land. Activities are a vehicle for passing down the skills, stories, and history, and in this process, students learn to see connections, gain respect for the community members, and develop a richer ethical framework. As these themes relate to the experience of the community members, preliminary findings suggest there is significant overlap in terms of the sense of hope and the importance of context; how these and other emerging themes connect with community forestry education is also what I am seeking to understand. With that in mind, overall, I am trying to formulate a better understanding, based on the interviews, what can be learned about community forestry from place-based education and what can be learned about place-based education from community forestry.

This research would be incomplete if I did not include my own reflections having been a student in the LL program in 2002. Based on my own experience and what I observed of other students, LL seems to be most successful (in meeting the goals of NwC) for students who are inclined to be stretched and deconstruct what they once knew or thought of conservation, rural livelihoods and communities, and ways of knowing and learning. As a student in the program, the experience provided a space to explore more deeply what I had been scratching the surface of in a special program at the University of Montana called Wilderness and Civilization (WC). Many of the LL students have participated in WC prior to or after LL. So, in many ways, we have been primed for the emersion experience. This is not meant to suggest students who do not participate in WC will necessarily have a different initial experience. The instructors make a deliberate effort to prime all of us by inspiring us to question ourselves and what we think we know. If a student is not willing to keep an open mind about the curriculum, the demands of living cooperatively, and the people and the place, they will have a difficult time experiencing the intended benefits of the program.

### **Benefits to the Community**

Once I have completed the thesis for this research, I will also provide a document that is an accessible version of the thesis for Northwest Connections, the community library, and others who express interest. I will also invite the community to a public presentation where I will discuss the results of the research and ask for their feedback. In addition, I will write an article for the local paper that describes my experience in the Swan Valley and the research I conducted.

NwC recently asked me to write an article for the Missoulian newspaper on Landscape and Livelihood, the research, and my experience as a student. I am currently in the process of writing this article. In the past, I have also done outreach work for NwC, helping to recruit students and spread awareness of the program.

A less tangible benefit to the community was the time I spent in the Swan Valley, conducting the research. I hope I was able to make some direct contributions in my time there whether it was through fuelwood gathering or chimney sweeping. As discussed earlier, community members commented on how rewarding it was for them just to be interviewed about their experiences. I hope this research proves rewarding for them in the end as well.

### **Lessons Learned**

One of the biggest challenges I discovered was locating former students and conducting interviews with them. I did not interview as many as I intended, and the ones that did participate were very enthusiastic and also very occupied with school and/or work. For some of the interviews, the students preferred having the interview questions emailed to them, which I offered, to provide them time to reflect on the questions and write a thorough response. This had a benefit of giving them the freedom to answer in their own time and think carefully about it. The downside, I discovered, is that an oral interview provides opportunities that a written one does not. All of the interviews, oral or written, asked the same questions, but the oral ones often had more information, inspired by the exchange in the natural flow of conversation. Because the same themes are emerging from both the oral and written interviews, I do not believe the

rigor was compromised by having these two different methods. One of PAR's strengths is having multiple methods. In the future, however, I have learned the importance of consistency in one particular method.

With that said, the process of doing the interviews, I believe, was a success in and of itself. Most community members expressed a great appreciation for an opportunity to share their experience of LL and their views on themes the research addresses. We both benefited. I learned more how to listen as well as gain strength as an interviewer. Personally, I benefited so much just by listening to a wide array of experiences, recognizing how complex communities are and what this may imply for future success in community forestry.

I also want to thank the Community Forestry Research Fellowship Committee for funding this research and allowing me the opportunity to participate in their annual workshop where I learned, among other things, my place on the PAR continuum, which certainly shaped the research and my analysis.

### **Acknowledgements**

Though this report is a work in progress and does not reflect the final thesis, I still find it extremely important to acknowledge all who have supported me and brought me to where I am now. This research would not have been possible without the patient and integral guidance of my advisor, Jill Belsky, and the support of a Community Forestry Research Fellowship. Thank you for believing in me and this project! I am humbled that Melanie Parker, Tom Parker, and Andrea Stephens saw me capable to do this research, and I am forever grateful that they asked me to. Thank you, Anne, for sharing your beautiful home with me and the lovely discussions by the pond. Thank you, Peter and Jean, for providing a space to write and the unending emotional support to see me through. I thank my parents for telling me that the world is my oyster. And, to the people who allowed me a space in their lives: those in the Flathead, the Blackfoot, and the Swan, thank you. Thank you to the people of the Swan and the land. I am forever learning from you. Thank you.

### **Bibliography**

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