

Forestry Tour Educates Youth in North Central Idaho

Abstract

The Clearwater County Sixth Grade Forestry Tour is a unique 3-day, 2-night program that provides participants an objective view of the importance and impact of natural resource-based industries while promoting an understanding of issues regarding natural resource uses. The targeted audience is 6th grade youth, but others interested in natural resources also attend. The tour is sponsored by monetary donations from the logging industry, businesses, and private individuals. Participants camp in the woods, tour the Clearwater Bioregion, and engage with natural resource professionals who use visual aids and hands-on educational approaches. Outcomes indicate a 32% increase in knowledge.

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Introduction and Need

The Clearwater Bioregion of Idaho, defined by the Clearwater River Watershed, is an area spanning five counties that share common physical and social characteristics. A bioregion is a "life place" defined by natural features and boundaries rather than political jurisdictions (Thayer, 2003). Because 90% of Clearwater County is forested, the wood products industry is a large economic driver in the region (Clearwater Economic Development Association, 2011). Many residents, especially youth, have a limited understanding of the importance and impact of natural resource-based industries. This unfamiliarity may lead to misunderstandings of best management practices for natural resources when youth become adult leaders.

It is important for society to connect wood/fiber production with quality of life and socio-economic trends, particularly in natural resource-dependent communities. Natural resource education helps youth make the connection. Youth need to understand how natural resource-based products are produced sustainably and in harmony with nature. A bioregional educational approach regarding these issues provides youth a means to understand the environment and the vital relationship it has with their communities.

The Clearwater County Sixth Grade Forestry Tour (SGFT) began in 1961 as a 1-day program to introduce students to the logging industry. The SGFT has since evolved into a 3-day, 2-night program focused on all aspects of natural resource issues in the bioregion. Two outcomes of the SGFT are to provide a balanced view of the importance and impact of natural resource-based industries on participants' lives and their environment while fostering civic responsibility that empowers participants

to make informed decisions that benefit their communities and region's environmental health.

Educational Approach

The North American Association for Environmental Education's (NAAEE) guidelines state that youth between fifth and eighth grade can understand relationships between the environment and society, and are ready to explore environmental systems in greater depths (NAAEE, 2004). At this age it is appropriate for educators to enhance these developmental traits by exposing youth to local ecosystems and allowing them to investigate and identify issues. Through this investigation students examine their own responsibilities and behaviors. Youth who participate in outdoor learning programs develop a stronger sense of place identity and environmentally responsible behaviors in contrast with those who only use the area for recreation. Lawrence (2012) speculates this is due to discussions and learning that takes place in the area. Powers (2004) found youth developed stronger connections and became more comfortable in the outdoors after exposure to nature through a forestry oriented program.

SGFT organizers select age-appropriate materials and develop activities that enhance the participants learning experience. The SGFT uses hands-on learning guided by local professionals from the Clearwater Basin, reflecting the 4-H preference for "learning by doing" (Richardson, 1994).

The SGFT hosts 40-80 area sixth grade students annually. Participants tour local resources via buses and engage experts about natural resources. In the evening staff and students gather around a camp fire to sing songs and perform environmental skits before heading off to sleep under tarps supported by poles. The primitive campsite resides on forestland donated by the Idaho Department of Lands and maintained by Clearwater-Potlatch Timber Protection Association.

The SGFT is funded by contributions from local businesses and industry. Volunteers grocery shop and cook meals at a nearby fire camp. Bathroom facilities consist of portable outhouses with hand sanitation stations. A portable water tank allows for drinking and washing purposes because running water is not available at the camp site. In addition to serving as an outdoor classroom, the camp provides a safe, comfortable venue for participants to experience nature while interacting with youth from different schools.

Presentations are made by personnel from the following: University of Idaho (UI) Extension; U.S. Forest Service; U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; Idaho Department of Lands; Potlatch Corporation; Clearwater-Potlatch Timber Protection Association; Idaho Department of Fish and Game; Clearwater Fish Hatchery; USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service; Idaho Soil Conservation Commission; Clearwater County Soil and Water Conservation District; Nez Perce Tribe; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Northwest Gold Prospectors; Clearwater County Search and Rescue; Orofino Rotary Club; Empire Lumber Company; and Northwest Management Consultants.

Accomplishments and Impacts

Presenters at the SGFT have the unique opportunity to tell a natural resource story to youth. The unique collaboration between UI Extension and natural resource-based partners is vital to the program success. This successful collaboration brings together partners who rarely work with youth or the

public while promoting program goals and sustainability (Strieter & Blalock, 2006).

Over 4,100 students have participated in the tour. Counting volunteers, the number of attendees climbs to over 5,000. One goal of the program is to have participants take home knowledge gained to share with parents and others. With a tour average of approximately 65 persons per year, and given an average household size in Idaho of 2.64 persons (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011), about 170 people have the opportunity to learn from topics taught at the SGFT each year. The general public also gains an understanding of natural resource uses showcased through media and press coverage.

In 2012 an in-depth evaluation, pretest, post test, and delayed post test were developed and administered by Moroney (2012). All attendees said the SGFT was worthwhile and would recommend it to their friends. Evaluations indicated a 32% increase in knowledge, while 95% learned something specific about forestry. Pre, post, and delayed post test results indicated long-term knowledge retention, with males retaining more while females showed higher post test scores. Rural youth showed a greater overall knowledge increase. Detailed evaluation results along with methods for planning natural resource based youth programs are presented in detail by Moroney et al. (2014).

Conclusion

The SGFT highlights the value of educating youth about the importance of natural resources. Ultimately, the best indicator of the success for this program is a populace in the Clearwater Bioregion that demonstrates increased understanding of the costs and benefits of natural resource use. Such understanding should lead to a deeper appreciation for management practices that sustain natural resources for generations to come.

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