



Economic stimulus funds novel project for Sierra Nevada foothill youth

University of California, Davis
July 21, 2009



UC Davis inland fisheries specialist Lisa Thompson (second from right) with Native Youth Conservation Project crew and staff. (John Stumbos/UC Davis)

Alan Wallace wants the nine young people clambering along the banks of the North Fork of the American River on a warm July day to learn something about watersheds and fish, about Native American culture and history, but mostly he wants them to learn about life.

The Auburn resident, a Nisenan Maidu and UC Davis graduate ('75, Applied Behavioral Sciences), is a member of the Sierra Native Alliance, which received a grant from the federal government's economic stimulus (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009). The grant funded an innovative eight-week job skills training called the Native Youth Conservation Project (NYCP).

One of the goals of the stimulus funds is to support summer youth programs, so the idea was an excellent fit. To qualify, participants in NYCP have to be between the ages of 16 and 24, and be Native American, foster youth, or low income. They're paid for five hours of work each day and participation in the project improves their chances of qualifying for more extensive job training offered by regional social service agencies.

"We're using nature as a forum," Wallace said. "Using all your senses reinforces learning. Getting these young people out and getting them exposed to life will get them thinking about it more deeply and help them build confidence."

The common theme through the summer project is watersheds, so Wallace contacted Lisa Thompson, a UC Davis Cooperative Extension specialist whose expertise is California's inland and "anadromous" (ocean-going) fish like salmon and steelhead trout. Wallace had previously heard her speak at a UC Cooperative Extension workshop on stream management.

Informal educational settings like these aren't the venues that extension specialists like Thompson get much acknowledgement for, but she sees it as important work nonetheless. "I don't have a lot of experience working with tribes, so I wanted to see if this is an area where I could have an impact," she said.

So Thompson stuffed her hatchback with the tools of a fisheries biologist's trade and drove to Auburn to rendezvous with the NYCP participants who are trying to get their bearings in life in a tough economy.

Thompson's newly adopted stream monitoring crew was eager to help, although initially a bit reluctant to jump into the cold waters of the American River and swim to the other side holding the end of a 300-foot-long tape measure. A leveling rod with white telescoping poles was used to measure stream depth. She showed them how, with some basic math skills and some orange peels, to calculate the volume and rate of water traveling downstream.



NYCP crew learn how to measure river depth with a leveling rod. (John Stumbos/UC Davis)

Several of them took turns measuring water temperature and dissolved oxygen with a probe dangling in the current, while others took GPS readings to mark coordinates for stream measurements. Nineteen-year-old Justin Luedemann, who is a talented artist, volunteered to sketch the project site on a standard form that biologists use to record river observations.

"I'm trying to show them whether this would be good habitat for fish," Thompson said.

She outfitted her recruits with snorkels and masks and instructed them how together they would float down a section of river to count fish, explaining where and why fish like to linger in certain parts of a river — typically where insects accumulate near a riffle.

"What if I don't see any fish?" one of the fish counters asks.

"That's important, too," Thompson responds. "That's telling you something about the condition of the river or the health of the fish population."

The crew floated face down in the river for about 150 feet before emerging to share their observations. One counted 13, another six, another none. On shore Thompson passed around pictures of fish species they would likely see — minnows, trout, and bass — to confirm the identities of the river's aquatic residents.

Wallace and fellow Sierra Native Alliance board member John Negrete, a Chippewa who coordinates Indian education for Nevada County schools, seemed quite satisfied with the impact the project is having.

"This is primarily a job skills class for conservation-based careers," Negrete said. "They'll end this project with a resume, a cover letter, some relevant field experience, and, we hope, sharper critical-thinking skills."

In addition to the American River, they've visited Doty Ravine to learn about vernal pools, the South Fork of the Yuba River to study aquatic insects, archaeological sites where the Maidu collected plants for food and medicine, even the Roseville dump to learn how garbage is recycled.

"This is a great program," Luedemann said. "This is teaching me how to meet people and get a job — even if it's not in a field I'll go into."

Kaela Davis, 20, who is of Maidu and Miwok ancestry, is enrolled in the program along with her brother, Jeff. She is fairly certain she wants to become a dental assistant or pursue nursing, but she appreciated the opportunity to explore career options and cultivate people skills. "This is a good organization," she said. "I've really enjoyed it."

At least one member of the group is reassessing his goals. Anthony Mangino, 18, had his sights on a career as a physical therapist or personal trainer but was quite impressed with Thompson's gear. "All this stuff is very interesting," he said with a big smile, standing knee-deep in the American River. "I might get into habitat restoration."

The Nisenan Maidu are native to the region that now includes El Dorado, Placer, and Nevada counties. Wallace learned a great deal about his ancestors' way of life from his great grandmother, Lizzie Enos, who was extensively interviewed by university anthropologists to document Maidu culture. He's doing his part to keep the old ways alive by teaching a local class in the Nisenan dialect, participating in Maidu gatherings to sing and dance, through his paintings and other art work, and by helping create the NYCP curriculum with Negrete.

"My thing is about the preservation of our culture," Wallace said. "This project seemed like a natural thing for an Indian group to do."

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