



The Learning Environment

Internship program teaches youth the value of working together

ANNO NAKAI AND JOHN STUMBOS

USING THE NISENAN language and knowledge gained from his great-grandmother, Lizzie Enos, environmental internship coordinator Alan Wallace teaches youth about the environment, about Native culture, and, most importantly, about life.

“We’re using nature as a forum,” says Wallace. “Using all of 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.”

Learning traditional land management and watershed restoration skills, eighteen interns worked with the Sierra Native Alliance this summer in the second year of an innovative internship program called the Native Youth Conservation Corps (NYCC). Serving Native youth ages 16–24 from a variety of tribal and economic backgrounds, the NYCC project provides job training and stipends for the interns, who work twenty hours each week on restoration projects in the Sierra Nevada Foothills.

Funded by the Stewardship Council and the Sierra Health Foundation, the goal of the NYCC internship program is to get youth out in nature. “Using nature as the real teacher, this program teaches youth how to work together as a group,” says Wallace, who feels that one of the major accomplishments of this year’s program was to engage the youths

NYCC interns filming presentations at the NRCS Plant Materials Center. Photo by Anno Nakai.



UC Davis Wildlife and Fisheries Biologist Lisa Thompson (second from right) with last year's NYCC crew and staff members, Alan Wallace (Nisenan Maidu) and John Negrete (Chippewa). Photo by John Stumbos, courtesy of UC Davis.

in a restoration project that seemed beyond their reach. "By challenging our young people, we help them learn how much they can accomplish by pulling together and helping each other as a group."

Working with an advisory group of cultural and environmental specialists, the Sierra Native Alliance was able to bring in guest presenters from the Placer County Water Agency, the California Indian Basketweavers Association (CIBA), Maidu Family Story, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and University of California, Davis, Cooperative Extension, Department of Fisheries and Wildlife Biology.

Lisa Thompson, an inland fisheries specialist from UC Davis, is a member of the advisory group who volunteers to work with the corps. "I don't have a lot of experience working with tribes, so I wanted

to see if this is an area that I could have an impact." The day-long stream monitoring and fish counting workshop in the American River that Thompson provided was one of the highlights for the group.

On a field trip to the NRCS Plant Materials Center in Lockeford, NYCC interns learned about basketweaving plants from Maidu basketweaver Ennis Peck. While learning about traditional uses of plants, interns were able to gather seeds and starts from the center to assist with the restoration of the Alta Vista Nature Trail adjacent to the Sierra Native Alliance's education center in Auburn.

Bringing home starts of sedge and deer grass, the interns worked on the restoration of a pond that is part of the creek system in the nature trail area. "We are removing invasive species, like Himalayan blackberries, and restoring the natural basketmaking plants like willow, redbud, and grasses," said Leo Landel (Navajo), an eighteen-year-old UC Davis student working with the project.

By trimming back old-growth willows to make the shoots more accessible, NYCC intern Clyde Prout III (Colfax-Todd's Valley Consolidated Tribe) is helping to create a source of basket materials for members of his tribe who are learning to weave. By exposing the interns to career pathways that are relevant to their community and cultural values, coordinators of the project hope to motivate youth to stay in, or return to, school, and to attain their career goals.

Anthony Mangino, an intern who came back for a second year on the project as a team leader, connected with resources for education in the field of physical therapy last year. Learning lessons about health from the restoration project, Anthony observes that "a healthy ecosystem is like a healthy body, with different parts of the organism being necessary to the functioning to the whole."

With a media component to the project, the corps is working on a peer-education curriculum to teach other youth about the value of culture, environment, teamwork, and communication. "Learning communication skills on the project has helped the work go much quicker," says intern Ahlani Adamson (Mohawk). "Instead of working as individuals, we are learning to work together as a whole, and have been able to achieve so much more than we thought." ▼

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