

Prince of Wales Students Study Wilderness

By Victoria Houser, Recreation Planner, Craig Ranger District, Tongass National Forest

For most Prince of Wales students, Wilderness is their backyard. It's what their houses look out at across San Alberta Bay. It's all those places on the map with the funny Spanish names and no houses, lights or people. For many of them, it's a place they have never been. But for the Craig High School natural history class, Wilderness has become a whole lot more.

Over the course of the 2008-2009 school year, the class spent one or two days a month with Tory Houser, Craig Ranger District Recreation Planner and Wilderness Ranger, learning about many different aspects of Wilderness management and theory. Their teacher, Cheryl Fecko, worked with the Forest Service to develop a curriculum for her students that would look at Wilderness concepts on a national scale and how they relate to the five local Designated Wilderness Areas: Coronation Island, Karta River, Murrelle Islands, South Prince of Wales and Warren Island Wilderness Areas.

The class was introduced to the idea of Wilderness and Wilderness management on a field trip to the Twentymile Spur Trail, which is located outside of Wilderness but is adjacent to the Karta River Wilderness. Students were asked to consider differences they anticipated seeing between a non-Wilderness and a Wilderness area. Students recognized the physical differences easily, but the social differences initiated some debate.

Following their hike, the students visited the Forest Service and were able to work on a mapping project, which helped them visualize the various land designations used by the Forest Service to dictate the management techniques used in each area. The students built GIS maps of the five Prince of Wales Wilderness areas and studied the National Wilderness Preservation System map to understand where Wilderness areas have been designated throughout the country.

Studying maps and the Wilderness Act led to a discussion of social norms and why the American public felt the need to create a Wilderness Preservation System. The students used a timeline activity to apply context to the Wilderness Act decision and later had a debate about whether to add more Wilderness to the Wilderness Preservation system. The students had to



Students take a break at the Karta River.

prepare for the debate by figuring out some of the social and managerial conflicts that may be associated with designating an area as Wilderness and restricting its use.

After the students' debate, the class direction shifted to monitoring and evaluating social and environmental effects in Wilderness. As a result of the debate, a section of the school yard, referred to with some affection by members of this class as the Panther Wilderness Area, was designated as a Wilderness area.

Like many true Wilderness areas, Panther Wilderness Area presented many non-Wilderness-like attributes to its student managers, such as a parking lot and a garbage heap. The students recorded these existing conditions in detail and even got to practice sound monitoring, thanks to Jacob Hofman from the Ketchikan-Misty Fjords District. Jacob sent over some of his sound monitoring research and airplane landing recordings for the Craig High School students, which they played over one of the student's giant woofer speakers. Witnesses on-site claim that a plane could have been landing right in the schoolyard. These activities helped the students practice Limits of Acceptable Change concepts and develop a plan for their desired condition for this pretend Wilderness area, along with some management actions to achieve their goals. Fortunately, the school administration recognized the need for the changes suggested by the students, and the Panther Wilderness Area was cleaned up. The teacher and students plan to monitor the

area in the future to see if it remains within the thresholds set by the students for the conditions they want to maintain in the area.

One of the goals of the school and the Forest Service was to make the concepts real and pertinent to the students. For this reason, the Forest Service planned activities with the students they could use in reports or research on a larger scale than just the classroom.

For example, during the class on air quality monitoring, Forest Service botanist Karen Dillman explained how forest employees use lichens to measure air quality. She helped the students set up a lichen plot in Craig. The information gathered from the plot, and many other similar plots across the Tongass, will be used by researchers studying climate change and air quality throughout Alaska.

Finally, after all of this talk about Wilderness, the Natural History Class took a field trip to the Karta River Wilderness to help the Forest Service perform their annual monitoring trip to the area. Some of the goals of the trip were to monitor the



Samantha Wilson finds a petroglyph.

amount of use on the Karta River Trail, cabins and river access points, create a lichen plot for air quality monitoring, and look for signs of cultural use. The class had the unexpected opportunity to witness a migration of newts, and count, photograph, and record their locations.

Tory Houser lead the class on an epoch hike from the Karta River Cabin to the Salmon Lake Cabin, where students had the opportunity to watch and work with the recreation crew as they made cabin repairs using hand tools. After walking 12 miles, working on a cabin and then helping to clear sections of the trail with hand saws, the students

and leaders were ready to eat and sleep. While nobody even wanted to go fishing that night, by the next morning they woke up ready for action. During the camp out, lots of questions were asked and answered. Students put aside their iPods and text messaging to join in fireside discussions and the appreciation of newts and solitude.

When the students returned to Craig they produced a monitoring report

for the Karta River trip. Their report will be use by the Forest Service as part of the Wilderness monitoring program and recorded as part of the Chief's Ten-Year Challenge for Wilderness. The students, teacher and Forest Service staff who participated in this year-long Wilderness class were greatly enthusiastic about its success and quality. Although the school does not offer the Natural History elective each year, Cheryl Fecko would like to work with the Forest Service in a similar capacity to incorporate Wilderness education, *Leave No Trace* and other Forest Service resource concepts into her classes.