



Institute has pull when it comes to wilderness, weeds - Part 1 of 2 on UM's Wilderness Institute

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The next time you go for a hike in one of Montana's wilderness areas and you notice there are fewer noxious weeds than there were on your last visit, you might want to thank the Wilderness Institute at the University of Montana.

The institute has been at UM since 1975 when people from different disciplines saw a need to increase education and stewardship in and around wilderness areas. According to program associate Laurie Ashley the institute today continues to "work through education, research and service attempting to raise awareness about wilderness areas, educate through both the students at the university and the public, and promote wilderness stewardship."

While its offices are on the third floor of Main Hall, the Wilderness Institute is part of the College of Forestry and Conservation, working with other departments on campus and running a two-semester interdisciplinary undergraduate program. There are five staff members, but Ashley said throughout the course of a given year it will engage 25 students in a year-long program, about another 30 in shorter courses, and another 100 students plus from 100 to 200 people through a spring weekly lecture series.

Last year the lecture series focused on native peoples and conservation. This coming year's series will deal with Montana nature writers who will talk to people about their work.

Ashley said the institute has evolved over the years and fluctuated in terms of its programs and focus areas. One consistent focus has been on education.

"We have a wilderness management distance education program where people can take online courses about wilderness management," she said. "We run a program called Wilderness.Net in conjunction with the Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center and the Aldo Leopold Research Institute.

"It's an online resource for people with information about wilderness including an interactive map of all of the U.S. wilderness areas," Ashley added.

The institute also conducts a wilderness photography workshop open to students and the public for a small fee. There also is community service and engagement work through a volunteer wilderness monitoring and restoration program.

The WI also administers the Matthew Hansen Endowment that funds research about Montana. Hansen worked with the institute but died of cancer at the age of 23 in 1984. The endowment was created that year.

It also offers special topics field courses including one in Yellowstone National Park and another in the

Mission Mountains. More recently the institute has done increasing research on communities and protected areas and the relationships that develop there as well as research on weed invasion.

For the weed monitoring program the institute focuses on wilderness areas in Montana and northern Idaho. It was, at the beginning, an effort to re-engage the public beyond the lecture series in what is called citizen science.

“Citizen science is a nationwide phenomenon,” Ashley said, “in an attempt to engage citizens in the collection and processing of data related to ecological change with the understanding ... that it’s really hard for agencies and land managers to really get a hold on how things might be changing.”

The volunteers are “eyes and ears” on the ground, documenting how ecological change is occurring to aid the agencies and managers by filling in some of the information gaps.

Restoration can be difficult, Ashley said, because ecological change - whether natural or human caused - is going on constantly. The monitoring program involves not only mapping weed invasion but also doing treatment through weed pulling. She compared it to fighting wildfires.

“Here in Missoula, we’re kind of the dead center of the fire,” she explained, “but out in most of our wildlands and our wilderness areas weed infestations are ... fewer and they’re smaller. So they’re the kind of infestations that you can fight from the periphery.

“With a fire you don’t go right to the middle ... and start fighting. You start on the edges and move in,” Ashley added. “Same thing with weed infestations, and our wilderness areas really are the edges of weed infestations, so if we can go to those areas - with a relatively small investment we can eradicate weeds from wilderness areas.

“Very different situation in Missoula where, regardless of how much effort you’re going to put in, you’re probably never going to eradicate weeds.”

So the WI volunteer monitoring program focuses on hand-pulling weeds, reseeding with native plants, and getting the data to the Forest Service so it can do follow-up with other treatment efforts.

Ashley said cooperation has been stellar between the WI and the agencies dealing with wilderness and weed eradication. While a permit is needed for some of the institute’s educational programs in the field, no such permitting process is needed for the monitoring project.

“This is the kind of work that the Forest Service really wants to have done,” Ashley said. “They are very excited about the kind of information we are collecting.”

That’s because the project is a direct response to a challenge put out by the chief of the USFS in 2004 on the 40th anniversary of the Wilderness Act. Based on 10 criteria used for wilderness management only 18 percent of the nation’s wilderness areas were meeting them by 2004.

“Basically the wilderness areas haven’t fared well in terms of the priorities the Forest Service faces,” Ashley said, “and the Forest Service faces very tough challenges in terms of where they’re putting their resources. They’ve got a lot of priorities out there.”

The challenge is to meet at least six of the criteria by 2014. One criterion is monitoring, mapping and treating weed invasion, and another is monitoring, mapping and restoring recreational impacts. So the

Forest Service is more than happy to have the Wilderness Institute's involvement.

Ashley said the monitoring project offers ordinary citizens the opportunity to be out on the land, connecting with and getting a better sense of a place while learning about the wildlands they're inhabiting and being able to contribute to their well-being.

"Most of us living in Montana love this place quite a bit," Ashley noted, "and a lot of that has to do with the amazing wildlands surrounding us. So this project offers everyone a chance to get out and be a little more connected to the place we love."

NEXT - Flora Brain and Mark Thompson will talk about their experiences monitoring and eradicating weeds in wilderness areas.

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