

1-1-1998

Experiential education for environmental educators

Tamsin C. McCormick
Canyonlands Field Institute, Moab, UT

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/nrei>

Recommended Citation

McCormick, Tamsin C. (1998) "Experiential education for environmental educators," *Natural Resources and Environmental Issues*: Vol. 7, Article 61.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/nrei/vol7/iss1/61>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Quinney Natural Resources Research Library, S.J. and Jessie E. at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Natural Resources and Environmental Issues by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact becky.thoms@usu.edu.



EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATORS

Tamsin C. McCormick

Canyonlands Field Institute,

PO Box 68, Moab UT 84532

ABSTRACT: In a collaborative arrangement between Utah State University (USU) Department of Forest Resources and Canyonlands Field Institute (CFI), a program has been developed in which qualified students have an opportunity to combine graduate level course work in natural resources with experience teaching these subjects to a wide range of age groups, in a field setting. CFI is a 501 (c) 3 non-profit educational organization located in Moab, UT, a small community served by a local USU extension office. The Institute maintains an office, classroom facilities, and housing for graduate students in Moab, as well as a field campus (Professor Valley Field Camp) on leased BLM land, 20 miles from Moab. The field campus is equipped with kitchen and teaching yurts, camping facilities, and a photo-voltaic generator that allows audiovisual equipment to be used in teaching. Much of the teaching is done on adjacent BLM land, in Arches National Park and on the Colorado River. CFI also has commercial river permits to operate on the Green, Colorado, Dolores, and San Juan Rivers. Programs conducted on the river are typically multiple-day trips incorporating the river corridor as the main focus for teaching. The location of CFI in south-eastern Utah provides access to an ideal outdoor classroom for studying and teaching geology, ecology, recreation and tourism, and land-management issues, particularly on the Colorado Plateau with the high desert, riparian and mountain ecosystems and vast acreage of public lands. The location of the USU extension office in Moab also allows for other university resources for the program, including library and computer facilities and other distance learning courses.

The Graduate Residency in Environmental Education is an 11-month program, that accommodates up to six graduate students. The bulk of the course work is conducted in the first six months, with the students teaching a large part of CFI's programs in the following spring and summer months as part of a teaching practicum. Courses are taught with a strong emphasis on field studies, and with a philosophy of experiential education as a means for effective learning.

The courses taught in the Residency program include an introduction to the cultural and natural history of the Colorado Plateau, desert ecology, geology, elements of environmental education, leadership and conflict resolution, river ecology and management, wilderness first aid and river skills, non-profit organizations and their role in resource protection, cultural history, adventure business and tourism, and public lands management. In the teaching practicum, students teach environmental topics to local elementary school children on nearby public land, conduct CFI's Outdoor Science School residential programs at Professor Valley Field Camp to middle school and high school students, develop curriculum and lead field studies in youth day programs, and teach and guide Elderhostel Intergenerational programs on the San Juan River. Largely as a result of the continuing conflict among various users of the natural resources, particularly in southern Utah, the major focus of the programs conducted at CFI has become a blend of natural sciences and social studies. Graduate students conduct independent service projects and are encouraged to become involved in public meetings, debates, and partnerships relating to public land management as a part of their program.

The Graduate Residency program therefore allows students the opportunity to explore teaching as a profession, to determine the age group with which they may be most interested in pursuing a teaching career, and to enhance their teaching skills in the outdoors, skills that may also be transferred to a classroom setting. They gain the medical and guiding skills required to lead groups into the backcountry and on river trips. The program also exposes the students to a variety of public land management agencies and non-profit organizations operating in the area, and provides them with the scientific bases for resource management decision-making. Students complete graduate-level course work in natural resources that may be transferable towards a graduate degree at USU or other accredited university.

The graduate level courses in geology and ecology offered through CFI and USU are also open to members of the community in Moab, providing the opportunity for graduate students to interact with others, particularly those from the resource management agencies, desiring further education in these subjects. The availability of these courses also provides an alternative to traditional distance learning programs for others in the community working on graduate degrees. This collaboration between CFI and USU therefore is an innovative approach that furthers the educational mission of both institutions.