



Proceedings
of the
**2015 Symposium
on Field Study**



The first ever Symposium on Field Study at Colorado College gathered together innovative faculty as well as field study support staff to highlight and share the best practices around this innovative teaching strategy

Presenters shared a variety of cross-disciplinary course examples, discussed technology and field study, cross-divisional support, assessment, and teaching to the whole student via field experiences. Top liberal arts colleges from all over the country were represented.

The idea for the symposium started with the creation of the Office of Field Study at Colorado College. The office supports the many field based course offerings at CC. There seemed to be a need for work on the topic of doing field trips exceptionally well, from both a pedagogical and administrative perspective. The symposium was a great step towards reaching that goal.

The proceedings presented here represent the work of the many presenters from varied disciplines that attended the symposium.

Sincerely,
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Director of Field Study

Emily Chan
Associate Dean of Academic Programs and Strategic Initiatives

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“Environmental History in the Field: Reflections on Teaching Wilderness at Grand Canyon National Park”
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On a bright, clear morning in March, 2014, the students in my American Wilderness seminar and I gathered at the South Kaibab Trailhead in Grand Canyon National Park, topped off our water bottles, snapped a few photos, and headed down the trail. Having spent the previous ten weeks on campus studying America’s complicated and changing relationship with wilderness, stepping onto the trail was a long-anticipated and exhilarating plunge into the world beyond classrooms, books, and computer screens. By the time we had traversed the steep upper switchbacks and were a mile and a half below the rim, we had passed through the grayish-tan-yellowed sandstones and limestones that form the upper layers of the Grand Canyon and were just reaching the deep red shales of the Hermit Formation. These iron-rich siltstones and sandstones were laid down some 280 million years ago, a time when the world was still stitched together into the great supercontinent Pangaea. As we pulled off our backpacks to have a rest at Cedar Ridge, the ancient rocks, the vast expanses, and the immense solitude were all beginning to engulf us and teach their timeless secrets.

The hike into the Grand Canyon backcountry – and the entire off-campus experience at the park – was an important part of the seminar. Although history classes rarely see the light of day except as it filters in through a classroom window, field experiences can make invaluable contributions to historical understanding. They can provide powerful new insights, deepen the reach of critical thinking, foster a greater sense of wonder and empathy, and open opportunities for publicly-engaged research. In the pages that follow, I offer my reflections on this off-campus experience and its pedagogical objectives with the larger aim of contributing to recent conversations on teaching environmental history (Lewis, 2004; Evenden, 2009; Feldman & Heasley, 2007; Langston, 2005; Quam-Wickham, 2003; Vrtis & Ivey, 2011). While environmental history will always be tied to libraries, archives, and printed sources, it can be also be profoundly enriched by hiking, seeing, meeting with experts, and growing sweaty, hungry and tired far from the usual comforts of modern life.

The Wilderness Seminar

Despite recent concerns about the Millennial generation being glued to screens and disconnected from the natural world, today’s college-aged students continue to care passionately about one of the oldest and most contested features of the American environmental movement – wilderness (Smith & Kirby, 2015; Louv, 2008; Orion Society, 2013). In designing the seminar and the off-campus experience that was positioned at its center, I wanted to capture and nurture that passion while simultaneously engaging some very critical historiography on wilderness ideology, the domestication of wild land, and preservation efforts. Balancing these objectives was not easy, and perhaps it never is. As Michael Lewis has so perceptively observed in response to this sort of conundrum, “the historicizing of love can be profoundly disconcerting to one *in love*” (Lewis, 2007, p. 5).

The basic structure of the course was organized chrono-thematically. Before we reached back in time, though, we first read Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* (1997) and discussed the haunting story of the book's central figure, Chris McCandless, and his ideas about wilderness. The book proved to be a very good choice for getting students thinking about the various meanings we attach to wild country and the sources and influences that shape those meanings. It also made the students quickly confront and question some of the unexamined assumptions they brought to the class: wilderness is good; happy things occur there; wild country is beautiful, and despite occasional hurricanes or tornados, it is largely benign. In surprising ways, the story of Chris McCandless emerged again and again, serving as something of a touchstone for many subsequent conversations about the meaning of wilderness in American society and culture.

From there, we turned back the clock to the colonial era and charted our way toward the present. Along the way, we explored the many cultural, social, political, and ecological processes that have shaped America's changing relationship with wild country over the past four hundred years. We gave particular attention to early American religious views on wilderness, the power of American settlement in pushing wild country into a cornered-up existence, the emergence of wilderness apostles like Henry David Thoreau and George Perkins Marsh, the preservation of wilderness, the significance of the Wilderness Act of 1964, and the contested and uncertain nature of wilderness that emerged with the environmental movement and recent thinking about the Anthropocene. By the time we were getting ready to leave for the Grand Canyon, the students had begun to see that wilderness has always meant different things to different people, that perceptions of wilderness have been shaped as much by difficult-to-pin-down human values as by scientific ideas or anything else, and that wilderness has been tied up with Americans' deepest longings, desires, and fears for a long time now.

Grand Canyon National Park and Field Pedagogy

With these ideas in hand, we headed into the field. The off-campus experience at Grand Canyon National Park occupied our entire twelve-day spring break. On the first full day in the park, we engaged the South Rim visitor experience, taking in many of the sites between Mather Point and Lookout Studio, as well as the geology and California condor ranger programs. Each stop raised questions that stirred our imaginations and critical faculties in ways that would never have taken shape in the same way in any classroom. At the Yavapai Geology Museum, for instance, we talked about why early 20th-century geologists believed *that* spot offered the "grandest view" there is along the South Rim and what those insights mean to us today. Along the Trail of Time, which is an interpretive walking timeline that exhibits the Grand Canyon's nearly two billion year stratigraphy, we pondered the meaning of that virtually unfathomable amount of time. And at Hopi House, which is one of the oldest structures in the park and was built to replicate traditional Arizona Hopi dwellings, we paused to think aloud about the relationship between the building's architectural design and 19th-century frontier ideology, and to consider what that building might be teaching us in the 21st century.

After spending our second day on a practice hike and preparing for the trail, we then slipped below the rim for four days in the backcountry. We followed the South Kaibab Trail down and the Bright Angel Trail up, and camped at the Bright Angel and Indian Gardens corridor campgrounds, as well as the Clear Creek and Horn Creek primitive use areas. Being

down in the canyon is overpowering in ways that are not easily explained, but like others who have been there and written about their experience (Newman, 2011), I think it has something to do with awareness and beauty, with authenticity and love, with connectedness and interdependence – all feelings that seemed to take shape amongst our small group as we sweated, cooked, waded into creeks, touched billion year-old rocks, sat along the Colorado River in evening stillness, and talked and laughed together. While these days were structured with camp activities and planned hikes, I let the canyon and the sheer experience of being in it take over the class as much as possible.

Once back on the South Rim, all of our experiences in the park and studying on-campus were brought to bear in conversations with National Park Service (NPS) officials and park concessionaires. We talked with an NPS superintendent, resource manager, and a ranger about contemporary wilderness issues currently facing the Grand Canyon, about natural resource and wildlife management, about ranger training and their roles in the park, and about external threats to the park. We had a particularly rich discussion about the idea of “impairment” in relation to a proposed scientific deployment along the Colorado River, and how the NPS thinks about that critical management issue at both the resource level and the visitor experience level. We also met with the general manager of the largest concessionaire in the park and learned about their operations and sustainability initiatives. At one key point in that meeting, we discovered how the concessionaire was transferring sustainability initiatives that had been pioneered in the park to their other, non-NPS operations. This finding challenged and complicated some of the views we had encountered in our readings, simultaneously providing new insights, sharpening the students’ critical thinking, and fostering a greater sense of awareness and empathy for the important role that business organizations play in managing wilderness areas. Similar moments occurred in our other meetings and experiences as well.

When not meeting with NPS officials and park concessionaires, our final four days in the park focused on research. Each of the students had developed a research project on campus, and some of them advanced those projects at the park by examining materials in the park’s Research Library, Museum Collection, and Fire Management Unit. A couple of the students also interviewed rangers or the Superintendent of the Horace M. Albright Training Center located in the park. All of the librarians, archivists, and NPS officials were extremely generous with their time and expertise, and some expressed an interest in learning more about our findings once the research projects were completed. Those conversations left me thinking about publicly-engaged scholarship, and ways to forge a closer relationship between the students’ research projects and the park’s research needs in the future.

Conclusion

Field study has been deepening the educational experience of college students for a long time, and it can enrich the teaching of environmental history, too. This became more evident to me during our time at the Grand Canyon than it had ever been before, and it was reinforced back on campus when I read the reflection essays that each student wrote about our time at the park. Many of the students described the new insights, perspectives, and understandings they had gathered, including several who later published their essays in a special section of the student newspaper titled “Roving Wild.” One of those students wrote, “My experience at the Grand Canyon allowed me to see the nuance of the decision-making

within National Parks and to see issues of management not simply in terms of ‘right’ or ‘wrong,’ but in gradation, in terms of ‘worse’ or ‘more harmful,’ ‘trying’ or ‘better’” (Higgins, 2014, p. 6). Another talked about the importance of her research: “Engaging with the rangers in a visitor capacity as well as a research capacity has allowed me to consciously acknowledge that their work can inspire people... The rangers I have talked to seem to understand the contradiction inherent in their mission yet find ways to make their work meaningful and important regardless” (Chastain, 2014, p. 7). While every class cannot make an excursion to a place like the Grand Canyon, field experiences near and far can enhance the teaching of environmental history in important ways and help students better understand their world.

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