impact

University of Idaho Extension programs that are making a difference in Idaho.

Camp prepares the next generation of natural resource decision makers

AT A GLANCE

University of Idaho Extension Natural Resources Camp is a six-day, immersive experience for youth ages 12-16 that uses Idaho's landscapes as the classroom.

The Situation

Idaho's young people will inherit responsibility for decisions affecting forests, rangelands, wildlife, water, soils, fisheries, wildfire, recreation, agriculture and working landscapes. These decisions are increasingly complex and require citizens who understand ecological systems, can evaluate science-based information, recognize competing uses and values, and consider the consequences of management choices.

At the same time, Idaho needs future natural resource professionals prepared to manage the state's abundant natural resources. Youth may enjoy hunting, fishing, hiking, camping and other outdoor activities but have limited opportunities to experience the science and management behind these resources or interact directly with the professionals responsible for managing them.

University of Idaho Extension recognized an opportunity to combine natural resource education, positive youth development, career exploration and experiential learning to address both needs.

Our Response

University of Idaho Extension Natural Resources Camp is a six-day residential experience for youth ages 12-16 held at Central Idaho 4-H Camp near Sun Valley. The surrounding landscape becomes the classroom as campers learn about Idaho's natural resources through hands-on, place-based education.

Campers work together to sieve soil collected to determine moisture and nutrient contents. Photo by Hailey Ellerbroek.

Camp programming integrates six major natural resource disciplines: forestry, wildlife, rangeland, soils, water and fisheries. Rather than teaching these resources independently, instructors help youth recognize their interconnectedness and understand how management decisions affecting one resource may influence others.

Campers participate in small-group laboratories, field experiences, demonstrations and outdoor activities. Experiences include forest measurement and ecology, wildlife management, soil health, watershed and

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water-quality concepts, rangeland management, fisheries activities, fish dissection, fish hatchery experience, drone technology and other field-based learning opportunities.

University faculty, Extension professionals, agency personnel and natural resource practitioners bring professional expertise into the camp experience. Their involvement allows campers to learn not only natural re-source science but also how that science is applied to real-world management decisions and careers.

The educational approach can be summarized as:

- Learn — Build foundational knowledge of natural resource systems.
- Experience — Apply that knowledge through hands-on and field-based learning.
- Evaluate — Consider ecological processes, human needs, competing uses, management alternatives and consequences.
- Decide — Develop the knowledge and confidence necessary to participate in informed natural resource decisions.

Program Outcomes

Pre- and post-program assessments demonstrated substantial gains in participants' natural resource knowledge. Of 96 camp participants, 91 completed both assessments and were included in the matched analysis. Average scores increased from 56% before camp to 71% after the six-day experience, a 15-percentage-point increase. Nearly 88% of participants improved their scores. A paired-samples t-test showed that the increase was statistically significant, $t(90) = 11.60$, $p < .001$, with a large effect size ($d = 1.22$).

These results provide evidence that participants increased their natural resource knowledge during camp. Knowledge gain is only one intended outcome of Natural Resources Camp, but it is an important first step. Youth need a working understanding of natural resource systems before they can evaluate information, compare management alternatives and make informed decisions.

Graduate student Hailey Ellerbroek explains tree growth and tools used to measure them. Photo by Randy Brooks.

Cooperators and Co-Sponsors

This event was made possible by support from the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Bennett Lumber, Rayonier, Elmore County Sportsman and Palouse Holistic.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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43-26-rbrooks-natural-resources-camp • 10/26

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