

Alder Creek Children's Forest: Connecting Field and Online Place-based Learning

BY JIM PROCTOR

Alder Creek Children's Forest, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit based in southern Douglas County, Oregon, is an organization for which I have a deep personal as well as professional connection. I grew up in Douglas County and ultimately received a Ph.D. in geography, with research interests in forest policy and management. I was especially interested in conflicts over forests in the Pacific Northwest because they often indicated profound differences in values and knowledge, the sorts of differences for which education may help promote better shared understanding, mutual respect and opportunities to forge consensus.

At the same time, my parents were aging and my family was discussing future options for its forest. We faced the same challenges others confront in this situation: as much as we wanted to keep our forest, none of us were planning to live in the area. But we recognized the immense value of growing up in rural Oregon and wanted to give something back to the community and schools that raised us. So, with the support of local edu-

cators, community citizens and organizations, and public and private natural resource entities, Alder Creek Children's Forest (ACCF) was founded in 2002, several years after the passing of my parents.

The educational philosophy of Alder Creek Children's Forest is embodied in its name:

1. Alder Creek, one of two streams passing through the forest, suggests our emphasis on *place-based education*.

There is no one right or wrong way to manage all Pacific Northwest coniferous forests given differences in site-specific factors. This approach to education necessitates field-based inquiry so that students learn in-depth about a place. It also necessitates attention to a wide range of physical, biological, cultural, economic and other processes that affect a given place, whether these processes be local, regional, national or global in scale.

2. Ours is a *children's forest*, not



PHOTO COURTESY OF BOB KINYON

Students celebrate the ribbon-cutting ceremony for a footbridge they built over Alder Creek as part of a riparian interpretive trail.

the more commonly-termed demonstration forest, because young people play a central role in the learning process researching alternatives, discussing options with their instructors and ACCF, and implementing and monitoring their management choices. Like the Project Learning Tree adage that education is not about *what* to think but *how* to think, our intent is not to *tell* young people how to manage forests but to *ask* them how they would manage our forest, and to help students build knowledge and skills so as to participate in good management decisions.

Our Place, Partnerships and Programs

Many ACCF activities take place on my family's 80-acre forest, located within a 15-minute drive of three local school districts. Much of the forest consists of second-growth, mixed-coniferous stands with sufficient variety in soils, hydrology and aspect to promote a diversity of vegetation. ACCF receives net proceeds from resource utilization in return for managing the land on my behalf; this agreement allows for hands-on student involvement. Student programs range from one-day, active-learning workshops to extended projects—e.g., stream monitoring, reforestation, habitat assessment, trails construction, interpretive signage—designed



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to fulfill specific Oregon Department of Education standards while conveying the larger goals embodied in our educational philosophy.

If you were to read our mission statement, however, you would discover that ACCF is about more than the 80-acre forest. It states, in part, "We offer a place, partnerships and programs designed for young citizens to learn to work together to create healthy, sustainable forests, watersheds and communities." We do this via a wide range of alliances we have forged, both with neighboring public, private and tribal landholders in the 2,500-acre Alder Creek-Jordan Creek catchment, and with schools and community and natural resource organizations in the area. In this way, we encourage our youth to situate the 80-acre forest in the context of its surrounding watershed, and to situate the watershed in the context of the communities that use and enjoy it. Partnerships offer a model to our youth of how to work together in land management in spite of differing needs and interests, and expand the range of possible place-based learning projects beyond that of the 80-acre ACCF site.

Looking Ahead: Oregon Explorer and the Oregon Virtual School District

As a geographer, I have experienced the power of geographic information systems (GIS) as a tool to help us visualize, analyze and communicate processes and patterns of relevance to land management, and from its inception, ACCF has used GIS extensively at both the forest and watershed scale. We have also explored alternatives to involve schools in GIS, which avoid the generally prohibitive startup training and maintenance costs of a GIS lab. Our decision has been to follow the increasing trend toward making GIS available online via common web browsers, thus allowing any Internet-connected school to participate and providing a ready means of sharing project data among schools. We have also developed tutorials and communication tools to enhance GIS-based student work using Moodle, an open-source online course management system.

Fortunately, the state of Oregon

has in place a number of initiatives that have the potential to provide online support to not only ACCF, but other place-based educational efforts in the state. One key entity is the Oregon Virtual School District (www.orvds.org), which offers course support services such as Moodle. The other is Oregon Explorer (see sidebar), currently serving specific regions of the state including Douglas County. ACCF plans to pilot its innovative, online-learning enhancements to field-based land management education with local school districts in the near future as a possible model

Oregon's youth is raised, are indeed a treasure, as are the bright young minds that will manage and make decisions affecting these forests one day. ♦

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PHOTO COURTESY OF JIM PROCTOR

Educational consultant David GrosJacques prepares students for an onsite workshop day.

for application by other schools in locations served by Oregon Explorer.

The potential value of a statewide educational initiative that connects field and online place-based learning about natural resources is tremendous, in at least two respects. At one level, there will be exciting opportunities for students to become experts in their local place, and to exchange ideas about forestry and land management with fellow students and communities throughout the state. On a broader level, this effort will further the preamble to ACCF's mission statement, one my family embodied: "ACCF...serves two of Oregon's greatest treasures: our youth and our natural resources."

The forest where I grew up in rural southern Oregon, and the forests near where the current generation of

Oregon Explorer a Great Resource

Visit the Oregon Explorer (www.oregonexplorer.info)—a new online resource for learning about Oregon's natural resources and environment. This place-based digital library brings together stories, data, imagery and map-making tools for enhanced learning and decision support.

The site is co-managed by Oregon State University Libraries and the Institute for Natural Resources. The Umpqua Basin Explorer (www.umpquaexplorer.info) is a basin portal of the Oregon Explorer, and a site where the partnership between OSU, the Partnership for Umpqua Rivers (which manages Umpqua Explorer) and Alder Creek Children's Forest will prototype new educational information and tools for students and teachers.