



Post Fellowship Reporting - Project Summary

Report Title: Wide Skies and Riptides: New England Wilderness Adventures
Name: Leah M. Plath

Other Team Members:

Program: EL Education Program

Trip Dates: 11/30/-0001 - 11/30/-0001
Location Visited: New Hampshire, Maine, Massachusetts

Post Fellowship Reporting Template: PFR Template 02

Project Summary: When I first received approval to teach a Literature of the Wilderness course, I was both excited and apprehensive. I knew I wanted to bring my high school English students out into the woods, but I first wanted to get more comfortable there on my own. With this in mind, I identified a series of wilderness training courses that would prepare me for the many scenarios I might undertake with students: camping, backpacking, kayaking, and rock climbing. I expected to learn new skills, meet interesting people, and have more than my fair share of exposure to bug spray. What I wasn't anticipating was to have my perspective on life, nature and education irrevocably altered.

I started with a four-day Camping Outdoor Leadership Training through the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC) in May. In July, I completed a 5-day Earth Living course through the Maine Primitive Skills School, followed immediately by a 5-day Intensive Novice Whitewater Kayaking course. My summer wrapped up with the 5-day AMC Mountain Leadership School backpacking trip through the White Mountains. Things did not go exactly as planned: for one, the Wilderness First Aid portion of my Mountain Leadership School was cancelled due to underenrollment; further more, I had anticipated (and registered for) a two-day rock climbing trip the following weekend, but sustained injuries during MLS that precluded my participation in that program.

I have never pushed myself to the degree that I pushed myself this summer, or spent so long outside of my comfort zone. I learned the technical skills to will allow me to successfully teach my future course, but I also learned "soft skills" that have made me a better teacher and a better person. It wasn't all about how to set up a tent; it was about how to learn, how to lead, and how to find those inner reserves of strength to keep going when it doesn't seem possible. I spent my summer camping, backpacking, and kayaking, but I also spent my summer practicing endurance, perseverance, and courage. I can't imagine a more meaningful experience.

Career Impact: The most mentally challenging part of my summer was, without a doubt, the first time I had to "wet exit" my kayak. Being able to safely exit a kayak underwater is essential to a whitewater kayaker's safety. To master my fear, to practice my wet exit over and over again, this was the hardest part of my summer. But with this skill behind me, I was able to safely run class I, II and III whitewater. This was one very specific example of the mental blocks I had to overcome this summer.

What changed me most as a person, though, was my five days at the Maine Primitive Skills School. This course wasn't about a specific set of survival skills as much as a philosophy grounded in Native American beliefs, teaching caretaker mentality toward the earth. In that five-day retreat, I stalked barefoot through the woods, built a debris hut, and learned to make fire with a bow drill, to choose just a few highlights. But more than that, I learned to think differently about my world and to see the interconnectedness of all living things, and that you're never lost unless you have a place to be and a time to get there.

Classroom/Community Impact: It's been a long time since I felt like a student again, especially the worst student, the slowest in the class. I spent more time than I'd like to admit as this particular student during my summer adventures. Without much natural physical ability, I had to struggle to learn every new skill and was frequently the slowest in my group. I was the last to get comfortable with the wet exit, the last to successfully set up a Piute deadfall trap, the slowest hiker in Mountain Leadership School (and the only one to lose some toenails), and I wish those were the only examples!

It's easy for me to forget what it's like not to "get it." I have an adult's maturity, unflagging optimism and quick sense of humor, yet I was faced with crippling self-doubt in some of those long, painful climbs down the mountains in the Northern Presidential range. It is these moments that are most valuable to me as a teacher. I have students who feel like this every day in the classroom, and it is my duty to help them gain confidence in their own abilities and learn that success is possible.

Open Response: I am currently planning for my Literature of the Wilderness course this Spring, which will not be restricted to adventure literature, but will also focus on the importance of our relationship with nature. In addition to this course, I am also trying to plan a fall "Intensive" on primitive skills, dependent on our school budget restrictions. In my own personal life, I've done some

whitewater kayaking on my own and am attending the Maine Primitive Gathering weekend with my husband, the first of hopefully many primitive skills training courses I will undertake on my own. I'm also working on re-growing some toenails, perhaps the most noticeable work in progress of all.

I came away from my summer overwhelmed and exhausted, but also sorry to see it end: I wanted to always feel that same stillness in my soul that I had felt while alone in the Maine wilderness, that keener sense of wonder at my world. I hope I continue to take it with me, and most of all, I hope I can inspire that same wonder in my students.

Quote: "It was exhausting, emotionally challenging, physically painful, and psychologically draining, but incredible despite (or perhaps because of) all these things...it was the hardest and most rewarding thing I've ever done."

Photos:



Carving white pine bark to make water-carriers



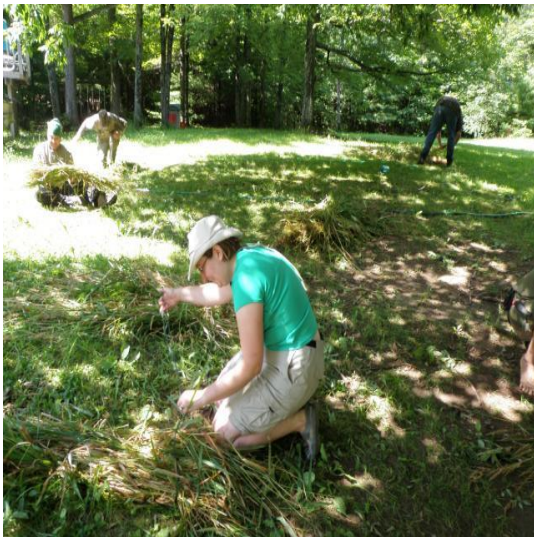
Here I am inside my completed debris hut



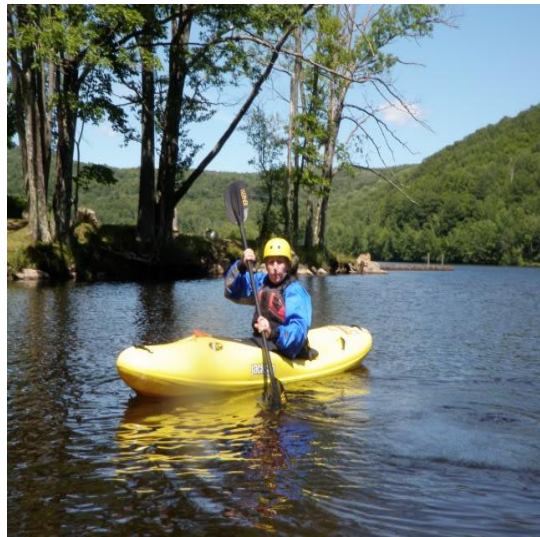
Learning proper "bow drill" form for fire-making



Carving a Piute deadfall trap



Weaving grass mats



Practicing kayaking turns on the Sherman Reservoir



Pausing for a photo at the top of the Gray Knob trail in the White Mountains



Mountain Leadership School at the completion of our 4-day backpacking trip