Conservation Partner Spotlight:

Empowering NextGen Conservation: Ecology Project International

by Erin Clark

Montana's youth grow up with access to unique natural resources in their local communities that most of their peers can only dream about. Where else, other than Gardiner or West Yellowstone, would you learn at an early age how to navigate past bison on the sidewalk on your way to school? How many communities across our state include kids who learn to keep bear spray close at hand while they wait at the school bus stop?

The wildness of our Montana home is a privilege but also presents challenges—social, economic and logistical.

Montana teens experience and develop appreciation for the complexities of living in a wild state through a learning and living program offered by Ecology Project International (EPI). Since 2008, EPI has engaged more than 1,700 Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming students in our Montana-based field programs in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and the Bitterroot Valley. Cinnabar Foundation has supported these place-based programs for middle and high schoolers since 2015.

Data collection in winter provides extra opportunities for learning and adventure. While snowpack persists, EPI students learn how to conduct research on snowshoes. These students are collecting scat for a study about moose reproduction rates.

Ecology Project International students engage with Chris Geremia, a Yellowstone National Park bison biologist, to explore how ungulate grazing impacts grass and forb growth in the park. Interaction with scientists is an important part of the EPI experience.

EPI students set aside their phones, pledge to step out of their comfort zones, and don snowshoes or hiking boots to set out on 5- to 20-day learning adventures. Working alongside wildlife biologists and EPI educators, they contribute to ecological restoration projects, actively deploy the scientific process, challenge their physical capabilities, and explore the perspectives of conservation stakeholders represented in their communities. They emerge from the experience with skills, confidence, knowledge, and heightened perspective to become our next generation of Montana conservation leaders.

In the words of a 2018 Livingston, Montana, student: "I don't think there's a program anywhere like this. You taught me so many aspects of how the wildlife and humans in Yellowstone come into play on a large scale. I have never felt confident that science was my strong suit, but you helped me grow out of my self-doubt, and I developed a closer understanding with my peers because of this experience."

In 2019, EPI will welcome more than 150 students from over a dozen Montana communities. These students will design and execute their own

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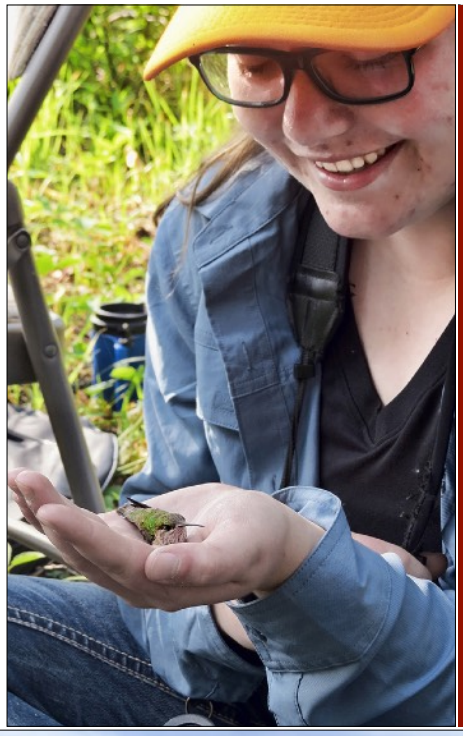
scientific research projects, contributing to research and service projects led by EPI's partners. Each student will leave their EPI experience having made an immediate, positive impact on habitat and wildlife, and having developed the determination and ability to make a difference for conservation in Montana for decades to come.

The power of the educational experience EPI provides to Montana youth is achieved through partnership with schools, teachers, researchers, conservation professionals, ranchers, and the funders who support EPI's mission. Together, these partners are empowering the next generation to sustain a uniquely wild Montana.



EPI's summer internship at MPG Ranch in the Bitterroot Valley provides immersive opportunities for students to interact with scientists and wildlife. Each intern works one-on-one with a scientist during the month-long program. This student contributed to a hummingbird study, which included several days of banding birds at MPG Ranch.

Erin Clark was the Yellowstone Program Director for Ecology Project International from 2012-2018. She is currently the Western Field Director for the Montana Wilderness Association.

EPI students learn how to use radio telemetry equipment to locate collared ungulates on Yellowstone's northern range. The students contribute data to help Yellowstone National Park biologists evaluate responses of bison, elk, mule deer, bighorn sheep, and pronghorn antelope populations to historically high bison populations.