

# Washington students take lessons from conservationists in campout

By Jutta Biggerstaff  
Hi-Desert Star

Wednesday, January 7, 2009



A Whitman College student perches on a boulder in Pipes Canyon and photographs his class as it learns about the desert and public land policy. (Dave Garry photo)

It's final project time for a group of college students who spent three months camping in and exploring the deserts of the west. One of their last stops was the Mojave Desert, where they camped overnight in Pipes Canyon.

The group, headed by Professor Phil Brick, were from Whitman College in Walla Walla, Wash., and they were participating in a course called Semester in the West.

The course objective is to study public lands, including its ecosystems and social and political communities, and public policy regarding those lands. The students engage in experiential learning in natural resource policy, ecology, environmental writing and environmental studies.

When Brick saw an article in the New York Times that included information from the Alliance for Responsible Energy Policy, he called Jim Harvey, one of the founding members, and asked him to talk to his 21 students. The professor was concerned his students were not hearing the other side of big energy projects: the impact of those projects on the land and the communities surrounding those lands.

Harvey and AREP enthusiastically agreed to talk to the students. Their presentation involved the issue of big energy buildout on public lands, Green Path North and the 120 applications for large solar and wind projects to the Bureau of Land Management.

Harvey found a camping spot for the group very near where Green Path North would traverse the land, in a beautiful, boulder-strewn area in Pipes Canyon at the foot of Black Lava Butte, which Green Path North, along with wind farms, would garnish.

Ann and Dave Garry, also AREP members, assisted with the demonstrations, with Ann providing a presentation of desert plant life during a short hike with the students. Also assisting from AREP were Betty and John McFarlane.

The students were knowledgeable, intensely interested and "just brilliant," Harvey said.

"They grilled me," he smiled. "I mean, they hammered me."

Harvey's presentation highlighted the impact of solar and wind farms on public lands. He talked about the amount of water those projects use and the amount of land they take up. He talked about the desert's ability to pull carbon back out of the atmosphere, in the same way that tempered forests do.

"It was quite an experience for me," Harvey said. "I'll never forget this."

It is AREP's contention that generating electricity far from its point of use and building long-distance transmission lines to deliver it is an antiquated approach.

After lunch, AREP took the students to Johnson Valley, where they saw some petroglyphs, took a hike up a canyon and did a second presentation.



AREP member Ann Garry teaches the college students about the yucca plant. Garry, a plant specialist, identified about 30 desert plants for the group. (Dave Garry photo)

One of the most important themes of this second presentation for Harvey and AREP was Germany's example of rooftop solar energy production.

This point-of-use system of generating electricity makes new transmission line proposals like Green Path North unnecessary, Harvey said.

According to AREP, Germany has little more than half of the solar irradiation potential of the United States.

"And yet Germany is in line to produce 10 gigawatts of rooftop solar by 2011," he said. "In California we're trying to do 20 by 2020."



Whitman College students listen to a second presentation by Jim Harvey in a canyon in Johnson Valley. The focus of this presentation is the use of photovoltaics, which AREP contends is the solution to the country's energy problems. (Dave Garry photo)

Germany focuses its renewable energy efforts on photovoltaics, the flat black panels that are seen on rooftops and calculators. And for them it is working incredibly well, Harvey said. Since Germany began the program in 1993, thousands of jobs have been created and costs are coming down.

"We believe photovoltaics is the answer — on already existing surfaces: rooftops, parking garages, warehouses, schools," he said. "There's millions and millions of square feet of roof space, why aren't we using it?"

The students were interested in using public lands for renewable energy, but AREP was able to go through exactly what that entails.

"These projects are permanently destructive, when you site a solar field on several thousand acres the whole area has to be scraped. It's gone. It's lost forever," he said. "I think that had an impact on them because you don't think about that."

Brick said the students were impressed by what they learned from AREP.

"They were used to thinking of solar as an unmitigated good, so I think Jim's presentation was quite an epiphany for a lot of students," he said. "To think there's a right way to do solar and maybe a wrong way to do it, whereas solar was something that just has to happen."

The professor said Harvey was able to communicate and connect with the students in a way that was not preachy, something they appreciated. He was also able to put the larger energy structure in context — big concentrated energy vs. small distributed energy and put it in a social justice context.

"It changed the way the kids thought, and it certainly inspired several students to do their final project on this very issue," he said.