The first-year cohort hit the ground running with a three-day field trip to the Olympic Peninsula in early October. In addition to experiencing the rocky coastline at Cape Flattery and the plush complexity of the Hoh rainforest, we also learned about environmental stewardship by the Lower Elwha-Klallam, Makah, and Quileute tribes. Students reflections provide a sense of the power of visiting these sites and hearing from those involved in the work of ecological and cultural restoration. Read student reflections from the field trip on the MES blog.

Lisa Hillier, who worked as a fisheries biologist for the Lower Elwha-Klallam tribe prior to dam removal, described her experience of the free-flowing river.

Visitors to the peninsula can watch the Elwha River flowing over rocks and boulders from the site of the removed Elwha Dam and get an inkling of what the river means to the Lower Elwha Klallam people. At the removal site, water rushes through a steep-sided narrow channel and smashes against steep rock walls before turning a corner and slowing down as the river widens on its last 4.5-mile stretch towards the Strait of Juan de Fuca, depositing the sediment held back behind dams for decades. The river flows, splits, and converges in the final few miles, allowing young trees to colonize sandy islands in the middle of the river. At the mouth of the river, birds feed on invertebrates that now thrive in the newly deposited sandbanks as the river meanders through multiple channels.

Five years after the official removal of the dams, two miles upriver from the mouth, the tribal hatchery manager can look into the river and identify salmon nesting sites on the riverbed (redds), deposited by fish returning to spawn in the Elwha. The Tribe now helps with the process of river recolonization by selecting salmon coming back to system to rear in the hatchery. This year, fish not destined to be hatchery parents were taken by truck higher into the Elwha watershed, and placed in the river with the hope that they will successfully spawn and that one day their offspring will swim the length of the Elwha River to spawn on their own. With, or without spawning success, the tribal hatchery staff know that the decaying bodies of these fish will provide nutrients to the watershed that has been lacking for many decades.

Our visit to the Makah Museum left a lasting impression on many students. Amelia Abernathy described the value of whaling for Makah cultural renewal.

During the years following western colonialization, the cultural practices of the Makah, especially that of the whale hunt, became increasingly precious to tribal communities who struggled to connect with their youth in a time where Indian language, art, religion, and cultural practice were condemned by the federal government. Being able to train new generations in the traditions of the whale hunt helped to restore some of the pride and the rich oral tradition that had been suppressed by colonialism, and would have otherwise died with an older generation.

Bobby Hall gained insight into the role of Traditional Ecological Knowledge in Makah whaling.

A tribal member at the Makah Cultural Resource Center noted that the hunters trained in traditional methods to ensure they were physically, spiritually, and mentally fit to hunt the whale. The Makah exerted their treaty rights and regained some of their sovereignty when they took the first whale in approximately 70 years. They did use modern technology such as power boats to tow their canoes, and a gun to put the whale out of its misery after it had been harpooned. Some might argue that the use of modern tools cheapens the Makah’s whale hunt, but I disagree. TEK still informed the prayers and training of the whalers and it’s ultimately up to the tribe to determine how best to exert their treaty rights; that’s the definition of sovereignty.

Caitlin McNamara captured the special challenge faced by the Quileute tribe, who currently occupy a one square mile stretch along the coastline and are in the process of locating key tribal building to higher ground.

The Quileute tribe, being a coastal community, is threatened by climate change, rising sea levels, and change to weather systems which can include more severe storms. Therefore, the tribes primary goal is to relocate to higher ground in order to avoid these expected changes. Many schools, tribal homes, and senior centers are directly in the area that would be impacted in the event of a tsunami. The Quileute tribe has incorporated TEK as well as Western Science…to make their move to higher ground and employ strategies to protect their rivers and habitat from climate change.

Erika Larson, who teaches incarcerated students in her work for the Sustainability in Prisons Project [LINK], shared key aspects and examples of Traditional Environmental Knowledge examples with them. She emailed me to share the response of her students.

We read through a general TEK paper to introduce them to the concept. I also gave them the Menominee paper to read and do an assignment on. This seminar got them soooooo excited...more than I had anticipated. We read through the TEK paper and I have never seen them so engaged, inquisitive, and hopeful. It was incredible. I have a part-Cherokee Native American in my group…it was really cool to see her come to life while we read through how these things can be incorporated to combat global warming.

Given tribes’ vital leadership on environmental work—from salmon recovery to watershed restoration—our focus on Native American history and sovereignty, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, and tribal resource management is time well spent. Our students develop a deeper appreciation and understanding of tribal contributions, and many collaborate closely with—or work directly for—tribes over the course of their environmental careers.