Each year new MES students go on a multi-day field trip as part of their first team-taught class, Conceptualizing Our Regional Environment (gCORE for short). All incoming students take gCORE as a cohort of about 45 students. The field trip is a chance for the cohort to get to know one another better as they start a two (or three) year journey together.

This year’s field trip focused on the cultural landscapes of the Olympic Peninsula. In a busy three days we visited [Dosewallips State Park](http://parks.state.wa.us/499/Dosewallips), the [Elwha Dam removal site](https://www.nps.gov/olym/learn/nature/elwha-ecosystem-restoration.htm), the Ozette prairies, Cape Flattery, the Forks Timber Museum, and [the Makah Cultural and Research Center](http://makahmuseum.com/). At each site we heard from a variety of scientists, managers, and community members who deepened our understanding of the human and natural dimensions of each area.

In preparation for the trip, students were asked to consider what made the locations they visited “cultural landscapes” and to also consider their own personal cultural lens or lenses. Last, students were asked to reflect on the unique challenges and opportunities that may face the managers of these cultural landscapes. Excerpts from five student essays are below. Their different interpretations and analyses demonstrates the diversity of perspectives among this group.

**What IS a cultural landscape?**

Students provided multiple definitions in their reflections. “Cultural landscapes are places where people commune with what is larger than themselves,” wrote Sarah Heiber. “The natural world is unforgiving, and cultural landscapes are created when humans are forced to bend to the land’s will, rather than attempting to bend the land to their will, as has become so common among the human species.”

Sarah continues: “As humans attempt to define where we belong, we inevitably run into the boundary of where we don’t belong. These are the cultural landscapes that captivate our imagination. In *The Trouble with Wilderness*, William Cronon talks about bringing nature home, and he makes a convincing argument for the ways that the wilderness vs. human dichotomy serves to the detriment of our sense of place as non-indigenous Americans (Cronon, 1995). He’s not wrong. We can bring nature home, but our sense of place is equally as defined by places that are not home: the other side of the mountains, the ocean, the afterlife, the realms that push up against the edges of our realm, however we choose to define it. In class we discussed what landscapes exist, if any, that are not cultural landscapes. The ocean and outer space came up as compelling examples. But what of the culture of sailors, leaving their homes on land to subject themselves to the will of an oceanic wilderness? And how many cultures have incorporated truth derived from astrology as they gazed at the stars and contemplated their place not on earth, but in the universe? There will always be a place where home ends and wilderness begins.”

Connor Murphy defined cultural landscapes as “places shaped by human culture that simultaneously inhabit the hearts, minds, and spirits of those who live in and amongst them.” Given such important influences, “management of cultural landscapes in a region characterized by tensions amongst a multiplicity of cultures (tribes and settlers, loggers and environmentalists) begs the question: whose culture? Historically, this has been a cruel calculation of money, power, and influence.”

Other students reflected on how cultural landscapes could be mobile, as well as temporary. Jesse Dotson described the field trip itself as a cultural landscape: “The term cultural landscape can frame the phenomena as being a collaborative work between people and (their) nature. In this context I believe it is correct to name the school field trip as a cultural landscape we carried with us as we went to Dosewallips State Park.”

**Reflecting on Individual Cultural Lenses**

Many students considered the individual experiences, assumptions, and cultural viewpoints that they carried as they learned about the history and people of the areas they visited.

In discussing Dosewallips State Park as a cultural landscape, Jesse Dotson considered the complexity of a public land where native lands once were: “I noticed this was an odd cross-cultural space – what sounded to me like a native name preceding the words ‘state park.’ I have such different visions in my head for those two different categories. It made me curious what the first people’s relationship with the park was. I realized in a new way that all of this land is native territory. As I walked around I tried to envision the landscape pre-contact. As we watched the salmon I wondered for how long had people been watching salmon in this river? How many of them had been eaten? I wondered what plants were foraged and how they tasted.”

Reflecting on the Makah Museum as a cultural landscape, Jackson Axley made connections to a cultural lens of his own: “When our tour guide discussed her culture, she placed emphasis on the sense of belonging it gave tribal members, as well as continuity and rootedness…Having her permission to try some of the tribal food, the salmon candy, was icing on the cake. It was such a tangible expression of her tribe’s culture…Knowing that members of her tribe have enjoyed dried salmon the same way for millennia was powerful. Nothing is better than food with cultural context. I believe food is the primary expression of cultural symbiosis with landscapes, and it is also the primary way that I exercise my own culture. I try to cook in ways familiar to my grandparents and great grandparents, and I keep records of family recipes. I even use cast iron pots and pans passed down in my family…The food seems all the more nourishing knowing that my family way down the line made it the same way.”

The Elwha Dam Removal, observed Connor Murphy, was the result of more than 20 years of collaboration between numerous stakeholders that continues to the present. “While walking on the newly formed sand beach at the mouth of the Elwha, Kevin ([MES director and faculty](http://www.evergreen.edu/mes/faculty)) shared with me that he was able to schedule the day’s events by writing to a long list of prospective speakers. The group is cohesive enough that it self-organized to provide a fantastic experience for the class. These stakeholders have managed to combine subsystems with complementary, yet different, cultural priorities into a beautifully-functioning larger system whose goal is the sustainable management of the cultural landscape. The fact that this system seems to run smoothly while handling small details (a class trip) as well as large details (tracking Pacific Lamprey in the watershed) speaks to the resilience of the system and the individuals who helped to craft it.”

**Role of Collaboration**

Shifts in understanding of the state they call home (recently or for many years) were common in student essays.“While walking on the hike after the museum I saw the landscape differently,” wrote Jackson Axley. “Big cedar trees became forty foot whaling canoes. The bark became the ropes for the harpoons. Berry bushes that I would have normally turned a blind eye to became culturally important sources of food. Everything had cultural context, and the simple act of walking through the landscape acquired a new depth.”

Many students were inspired by speakers at the Elwha dam removal. “The cultural landscapes we visited on the Olympic Peninsula demonstrated how indigenous and western perspectives are required to intersect in order to approach environmental and social restoration,” wrote Jessica Doyle. “Much could be done within dominant power structures to support the use of indigenous and traditional ecological knowledge in the context of environmental restoration. The Elwha dam removal project required integrating knowledge and practices of the Tribes, State and Federal land management agencies, citizens and scientists. [Elwha River Restoration Director] Robert Elofsen’s presentation highlighting the biggest dam removal project in U.S. history demonstrates that the assertion of the rights and objectives of Tribes can be implemented through persistence and cooperation with associated agencies and stakeholders. The Elwha-Klallam Tribe now has a Natural Resources division employing 40 people, whereas Robert Elofsen started as the lone member of the department.”

Connor Murphy reached a similar conclusion. “The culture of the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe is a culture that allows for cross-collaboration with other cultures, places a greater emphasis on sustainable harvest than rapid resource extraction, and evaluates success over a long-time scale. In the shared management of the cultural landscape of the Elwha this culture, without interference from an overriding corporate interest, is the basis for the system that supports collaboration across significant cultural differences. When choosing which culture to prioritize one hopes that a collaborative approach will triumph over a combative one.”