Each year new MES students go on a multi-day field trip as part of their first class, Conceptualizing Our Regional Environment (called gCORE for short). All incoming students take gCORE as a cohort of about 45 students, and are led by three faculty members. The purpose/theme of the class is to \*\*\*KEVIN/AVERI one sentence please\*\*\*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, as well as to consider the geography, history, and cultural relevance of the Pacific Northwest.

The 2017 cohort of MES students took their field trip to the Olympic Peninsula. In a busy three days they 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), and [the Makah Cultural and Research Center](http://makahmuseum.com/), among others. At each site they heard from a variety of scientists, managers, and community activists who deepened their understanding 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, and the complexity of interdisciplinary environmental investigation.

**What IS a cultural landscape?**

Students provided multiple definitions in their reflections. “Cultural landscapes are places that (where?) people commune with what is larger than themselves. 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.” writes Sarah Heiber.

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. All landscapes in the Pacific Northwest are cultural landscapes. 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 defined the field trip itself as a cultural landscape, saying: “…the term cultural landscape can frame the phenomena [of social construction] 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 Elwah Dam Removal was the result of more than 20 years of work by numberous stakeholders. “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.” Wrote Connor Murphy.

**Articulating a Paradigm Shift**

As students interacted with representatives and managers from many of their stops, several students expressed a shift in their understanding of indigenous cultures.

Jessica Doyle wrote about speaking with Joshua Etherton, the Quileute Natural Resources Department Harvest Manager who presented to the class: “A presumably non-indigenous fisheries scientist, Etherton spoke against the notion of romanticizing or fetishizing indigenous cultures or viewing them as magical or mystical. These assumptions are often a mis-step in acknowledging the lasting effects of settler-colonial roles in disenfranchising indigenous people from their place-based interactions with the environment. Becoming aware of my own cultural lens in the context of this confounding history has led me to rethink many of my previous assumptions and idealizations of indigenous culture, and the ways I have excluded the culture I was raised in as capable of comprehending adequate equitable solutions to environmental issues.”

Speaking of the Makah, Sarah Heiber provides examples of ways this tribe breaks from romantic stereotypes about indigenous people: “Spencer McCarty discussed several ways in which the Makah defy popular projections of indigenous North Americans as peaceful, generous, and nature-loving. The brutal process of whale hunting, the keeping of slaves, the killing of enemies, the strict hierarchy of classes within their society may not live up to fantasies of non-indigenous Americans dissatisfied with the way their own culture has sought to answer the question of how we relate to that which surrounds us and sustains us. However, the Makah’s answer to this question developed from their own necessity, and enabled them to survive for thousands of years. They are entitled to take pride in that, and their pride endures. They are not responsible for living up to anyone else’s expectations of what a culture should look like.”

**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. 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” said Jackson Axley.

Jessica Doyle and Connor Murphy sum up what many students concluded about management of cultural landscapes when considering the Elwha River. Jessica writes, “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….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. Robert Elofsen’s presentation highlighting the biggest dam removal project in US 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 concludes: “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.”

Cited Works: