

WE ALL LIVE DOWNSTREAM

2014 Copper River Stewardship Program

By Robin Underwood, Wrangell Institute for Science and Environment

On a drizzling morning at Sourdough Campground on the Gulkana River, the boat launch is alive with color and action. Bright yellow and blue rafts are inflated and rigged for the river, dry bags and coolers packed and tied into place, and life vests and oars readied. Nearby, students are interviewing Alyeska Pipeline maintenance staff, learning about the challenges of “keeping the oil in the pipe,” which is how Larry Nutter describes the essence of his job. Other students are working alongside Park Service and BLM staff to get the boats packed and ready for our adventure down the Gulkana River.

This was day two of the 2014 Copper River Stewardship Program, and already the youth are immersed in a combination of learning, work, and fun. Rosey Robards from Alaska Teen Media Institute has been showing the students how to compose photos, conduct a brief but meaningful interview, and most importantly shoot a video that won't make us all seasick. The goal of the program is to help the youth see themselves as active members of a community that includes the whole watershed. A common theme that repeats itself throughout the program is “we all live downstream,” meaning that what happens in any part of the watershed affects the whole.

For many adults of this region, the 25th anniversary of the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill brings back fresh personal memories. But for 15-year-olds the event seems long ago. As we explored the watershed this year, we learned about the spill itself, the ecological aftermath, and also how it influenced communities, the industry, and the politics of the region. Throughout the week, students worked with guest teacher Jack Dalton to write “creative non-fiction” capturing their experiences and impressions.

The first adventure was an overnight on the Gulkana River, exploring the boreal forest. It had been raining and the river was running high and a little muddy. As we floated, we watched small landslides sloughing off the outside curves, helping form the distinctive meandering pattern of Alaskan rivers, filling the water with glacial and volcanic sediments. Days later on the Copper River Delta, we will slip and slide on tidal beaches covered with the same fine clay. It is a good reminder that although the Copper Basin and Cordova can feel far apart, we are inexorably linked by the Copper River.

On the ferry ride to Cordova, trip leader Kate Morse of Copper River Watershed Project assigned a role-playing exercise. The students read first-hand accounts from people involved in the oil spill and cleanup efforts, then share their experiences with the group. Amidst laughter and teenage antics was the realization that as with all historic events, behind the facts and the big stories are a whole lot of ordinary people doing their best, trying to make a difference.

The group canoed with the tide out Alaganik slough on the Copper River Delta, where they stayed at a US Forest Service research camp. The wetlands are like another world, especially to the upriver students. Wearing chest waders, the group got a chance to learn about the amazing diversity of plants, and help maintain nest islands used by Dusky Canada Geese.

Throughout the adventure, salmon were a common theme. They are a common economic thread, a cultural icon both up and down river, and the foundation of the ecosystems we all rely on. On the last evening of the trip, the group feasted on freshly-caught salmon as they visited with Dune Lankard of the Eyak Preservation Council. Dune shared his story of working as an environmental activist in the wake of the oil spill, helping his people regain control of their lands and their heritage.

The Copper River Stewardship Program is put on by a partnership of organizations including Wrangell Institute for Science and Environment, Copper River Watershed Project, Prince William Sound Science Center, Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, BLM Glennallen Field Office, and the US Forest Service. Funding for 2014 was provided by Prince William Sound Regional Citizens Advisory Council, Alaska Forum on the Environment, Bureau of Land Management's Take It Outside Program, and Alyeska Pipeline Service Company. The student writings, photos, and interviews will be incorporated into a video on the lessons learned this year.