

Direct Experience in the American West

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Introduction

WHEN NEWS BROKE that a group of armed militants had seized the headquarters of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge on January 2, 2016, many people around the country grasped for context in order to understand what was happening and why. What they may have found is that the refuge and its surrounding areas of Harney County are spaces in which issues of federal lands, ecosystem conservation, rural economics, libertarian politics, indigenous rights, and human-animal relationships converge in a unique, but not entirely isolated, way in the broader geographic region of the American West. But understanding these convergences at particular sites in more than superficial ways, especially for people not from the rural intermountain west, requires time spent sitting high in the desert mountains or driving down endless dirt roads. It requires listening to locals as they share a sense of place and a careful study of the plants and animals that encode the stories of the landscape. It requires, in short, direct experience.

Universities too often consider learning opportunities such as fieldtrips as budgetary inefficiencies, putting at risk one of the cornerstones of geographic education. The purpose of this paper is to document a September 2017 fieldtrip to the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge and Steens Mountain Wilderness Area in southeastern Oregon that allowed for Humboldt State University students to experience the unique history, geography, ecosystems, and politics underlying the Malheur occupation and the greater region. In doing so, this paper advocates for fieldwork as a pedagogical strategy in geography courses, illustrating how direct experiences from multiple perspectives lead to a more nuanced, culturally inclusive, and deep reading of the landscape.

Direct Experience as a Mode of Learning

Field-based and experiential courses have traditionally been important in geography undergraduate and graduate curricula, and many argue that they remain a defining feature of the discipline and an important pedagogical strategy (Fuller et al. 2006). Research has shown a causal relationship between field opportunities and deep learning practices (Boyle et al. 2007). Moon (2004) characterizes deep learning as internally motivated practices,

steeped in critical thinking and a sense of ownership. Hope (2009) clarifies the distinction between deep learning and traditional assessment-based learning, stating: “In contrast surface learning has an external motivation; it feels like an imposition, and tends to be uncritical and lack an understanding of the bigger picture underpinning particular assessment task” (170). Hig-gitt (1996) links deep learning through field-based practices with student affective responses such as attachments to the subject, emotional resonance, and value-based assessments of place across multiple scales.

Many geographers show that field-based pedagogies allow students to develop both subject-specific and technical skills (Andrews et al. 2003) as well as interpersonal and cooperative project-managements skills (Boyle et al. 2003; Gold et al. 2003). Fieldwork also encourages active forms of learning (Kent et al. 1997), allowing students to connect theory with real-world experiences and fostering intellectual curiosity about the sites of fieldwork that can lead to unexpected connections (Fuller et al. 2006). Recent research has shown that fieldwork and direct-experience learning opportunities can support student mental health and well-being through community building and shared experiences (Conradson 2016). Similarly, Holton (2017) advocates for the pedagogical value of fieldwork in creating aesthetic connections between people and place, suggesting these connections allow students to become more self-reflexive about their own role and personal investment in being a learner in the environment. And Thomas and Munge (2017) argue that fieldwork provides the opportunity to integrate new technologies and learning activities into a curriculum and allows educators to witness in real-time the success or failure of new approaches.

Yet geographic fieldwork should not be viewed as an unbiased or unprivileged practice, and educators should be mindful of the inclusive/exclusive practices associated with field-based learning (Nairn 2002). Educators must be conscious that the “going to see the world for yourself” (Hope 2009: 170) model of fieldwork is a practice of viewing reliant on the assumption that an unmediated, objective truth is visible (Rose 1993). Historically, the so-called “mud on your boot geographer” has entered the field not as an unbiased observer, but as one encountering the world through a socially constructed filter deeply rooted in colonialism, conquest, and the privilege of uncontested mobility through the environment. Nairn (2005) calls this a naïve epistemology, based on “the assumption of the unmediated presence of the truth of nature, that the truth or reality will be transparently available to students if they experience a situation rather than read about it” (294). She warns that entering the field with this mindset can fail to challenge student views and

ultimately reinforce preconceived notions of otherness. She concludes by arguing that educators must address the geographic and historical processes that position the subjects encountered in the field beforehand in order to situate the experiences of the students within the appropriate context.

While Nairn (2005) and others (see Abbott 2006; Herrick 2010; Hughes 2016) draw attention to the subjectivities embedded in viewing another environment and are cautious not to exaggerate the impacts of geography field-based courses, their intent is to encourage proper framing of the experience rather than discouraging the practice outright. Hope (2009), for example, advocates for more individualized frameworks, noting the same experience can be transformative to some students and not to others, and agrees that thorough contextualization in the classroom beforehand and strategic one-on-one conversations in the field can lead to more widespread and consistent transformative impacts across the participating students. In our case, we addressed this issue and provided historical and geographic context for the trip by providing a selection of required readings from *High Country News* and Oregon newspapers as well as listening to podcasts from Oregon Public Broadcasting in the vans *en route*.

Malheur, Harney County, and the Occupation

In September 2017, in an interdisciplinary collaboration between the geography and wildlife departments at Humboldt State University, students traveled to the desert mountains of eastern Oregon to experience the Western landscape and learn about how the relationship between rural politics, environmental processes, and wildlife habitats shapes the American West. The Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, with an entangled history of white settlement, ecological conservation, and cowboy economics that can be directly traced through history to the recent occupation, served as an ideal landscape to experience this unique set of geographic relations in the Intermountain West. The goal of the interdisciplinary field courses, taught in parallel by one human-geography professor, one physical-geography professor, and one wildlife-ecology professor, was to allow students from both majors to place their studies into a new context by interacting and sharing discipline-specific knowledge with each other, constructing multiple ways of seeing the world within one experience. Our assumption going in was that fostering this interdisciplinary conversation would allow students to converse and learn from each other as they moved between scales of analysis ranging from the landscape to the individual species of animal.

Malheur National Wildlife Refuge

- One of 550 refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System.
- Established in 1908 by President Theodore Roosevelt to protect bird species decimated by hunters collecting feathers for the hat industry.
- Encompasses 187,757 acres of wildlife habitat along the Pacific Flyway.
- Provides resting, breeding or nesting habitat for 320 bird species, along with other forms of wildlife.

Sources: ESRI, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

MARK NOWLIN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

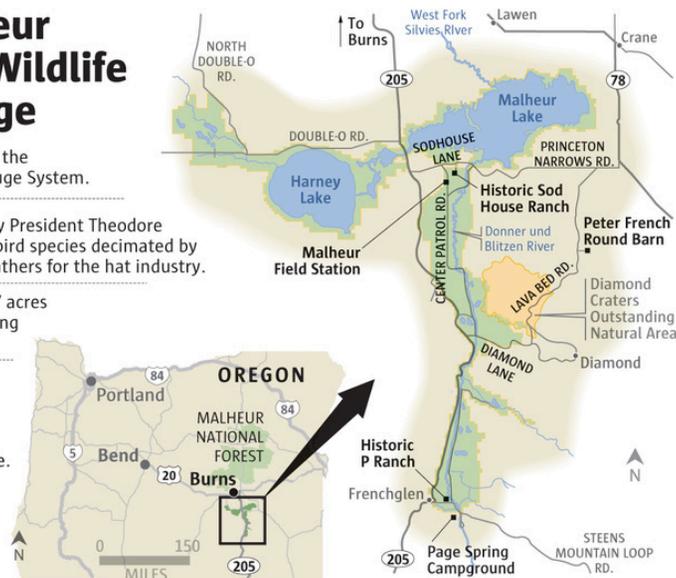


Figure 1.—Map of Malheur Wildlife Refuge. (Mark Nowlin map, Seattle Times)

During this trip, we camped and experienced the remote high desert of southeastern Oregon together, had conversations with Refuge staff, people from the Bureau of Land Management Staff, and an elder member of the Burns Paiute Tribe to understand more about the history of the area and local views on the recent conflict, and spent time in observation to learn about ecosystem restoration and wildlife habitat through direct experience. During the trip, we required students to read the landscape of a particular location, documenting with text and visual images how a particular site of interest reveals a unique intersection of cultural, historical, and ecological processes.

In many ways, the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge serves as a perfect field trip location to study the interconnectedness of human and physical geography. Located in arid southeastern Oregon, the Malheur Basin was home to one of largest cattle empires in the country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. After years of unregulated hunting and environmental alterations in the Blitzen Valley, including the channeling of streams and draining of wetlands, migratory waterfowl population was in steep decline. The Malheur National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1908 and expanded during Great Depression recovery programs with intensive restoration work. From the beginning, there was opposition to the refuge and all federally owned land in the area, rooted in the belief that the refuge was a government overreach, a tool for rich urban East Coast elites to take

money from poor rural ranchers and cowboys: “Much of the opposition to the refuge had been, at least on the surface, on economic grounds. Locals had warned that the refuge would take land out of the economic tax base and also put an abrupt halt to development” (Langston 2003, 96). This narrative continues to this day and is the primary libertarian philosophy underpinning the Malheur Occupation and cowboy economics more broadly.



Figure 2.—Buena Vista Overlook at Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. (Josh Shindelbower photo)

Although remote and with specific conditions unique to the area, the Malheur Basin possesses myriad ecological and political conditions indicative of the entire Intermountain West. This includes a complicated history with the indigenous population in which a genocidal past folds into contemporary land use/land rights arguments that exclude entire populations. The area has a unique cooperative rangeland management system, a wild horse population that threatens the local sagebrush environment, and one of the largest freshwater marsh ecosystems in the western United States, which serves as a critical stop for migratory birds on the Pacific Flyway. The collection of these factors, along with the recent history, creates an ideal site for direct-experience geographic education.

Field Experiences

The direct field experience in the Malheur Wildlife Refuge area allowed students not only to put the recent occupation into context, but also to gain

an appreciation of the deeper history and hidden undercurrents of conflict within this region and more broadly across the American West. Due to the sensitive nature not only of the Malheur occupation and the continuing residual impacts on the local community, but also the broader debate that has recently emerged about the role of the federal government in Western land-use policies and practices, this recount of the fieldtrip will focus less on specifics from the conversations that we had with a host of local experts and instead focus on transformational aspects and unique insights from the experience.

One such instance was during our visit to the Refuge Headquarters, where we were able to witness the site of the occupation and get a sense of the unique geography and cooperative land-management practices of the Refuge and surrounding areas. As with many other rural western counties, the federal government is simultaneously the largest employer in Harney County and a target of widespread resentment from within the community, most notably in debates about the regulations detailing how, when, and by whom cattle grazing is permitted on Refuge grounds. Being at the Refuge allowed us to observe the landscape and put into context the contesting claims of the space, one of which favored scientific analysis and environmental management practices while the other oriented toward the ranching tradition, neoliberal economic structures, and the minimization of scientific findings. Longcore wrote in his 2016 op-ed, “[t]he armed takeover of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge is, therefore, not just an attack on a federal property. It cuts deeper than that. It is an attack on the modern science-based approach to land management and it is an attack on the value and worth of science and scientists in the United States.” Our visit to Refuge Headquarters reinforced the land use politics we had discussed in class prior to the trip, while engaging students in active forms of learning and full sensory experiences of the environment. We could see firsthand the management practices of the grasslands, read interpretive signs about the sediment accumulation and invasive carp species in the lake, and hear the sounds of birds as they passed over us. This experience gave deeper value to the hard scientific land-use management work people do in the unforgiving rangelands of the Great Basin.

We were able to further explore the politics of land management when we first arrived in the greater Malheur area and were making our way up Steens Mountain Road on the way to our campground. During this trip we came across the famous “Hollywood Herd” of wild horses, named so for their familiarity with people and apparent willingness to pose for pictures. The scene was a surreal experience, one that caused us all to pause with a



Figure 3.—Road to South Steens Campground. (Josh Shindelbower photo)

sense of wonder and awe. In many ways, wild horses are the quintessential symbol of the American West, deeply entrenched in cowboy mythology, romanticism, and a sense of freedom. We sat and watched the horses for some time, witnessing firsthand what we would later learn to be a microcosm of the complicated story of land use in the American West.

The Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act is one of the more controversial management practices regulated by the Bureau of Land Management. This act strives to maintain an ecological balance of horse population on rangelands and, with strict mandates against culling and exportation to foreign slaughterhouses, has resulted in the establishment of numerous holding pens across the West to absorb populations removed from federal lands. Even with a relatively successful adoption program, there are currently more than 67,000 horses on federal lands (three times the estimated rangeland capacity) and an additional 49,000 in federally operated holding pens.

We entered this landscape at a contentious time for the wild horses, one where pushes for deregulation and potential massive changes to federal land-management practices have created political upheaval and an influx of contentious discourses. The issue of wild horse management is a deeply entrenched, complex problem that is not as simple as either side of the political debate makes it out to be. Horse advocacy groups claim that the BLM, despite explicit laws from Congress to protect wild horses, intention-



Figure 4.—Wild Horses in the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Area. (Josh Shindelbower photo)

ally misleads the public about their impact, inflates population estimates, and are beholden to ranching special-interest groups. Advocacy groups promote new methods to reduce the fertility of wild horses, including field-based methods that do not require the herding of horses into a centralized facility, while the federal government argues that fertility control efforts are a failure and nearly impossible to carry out, asking for Congress to repeal regulations against the slaughter, exporting, and euthanasia of excess horse populations (2017).

The wild horse debate is one that cannot be easily reduced to the simple and most politically divisive discourse without directly experiencing the landscape in which these events are taking place. While the concept of field-based sterilization of horses on the surface holds promise to control the population on multi-use public land, the practice is controversial on both sides of the debate and requires the mobility of field agents across often vast expanses of remote, rugged territory. Only when immersed in the environment, seeing these animals, and getting a sense of the geography of the area do you get a true sense of the complexity of the issue. Direct experience in field studies allows for students to take in the romantic sense of grandeur and wonder that comes from watching wild horses run across the high desert grasslands while simultaneously witnessing firsthand how federal programs, regulations, and special-interest groups dictate socioecological relationships on the ground.

Reflections

Direct field experiences for undergraduate students provide the opportunity to learn in the world and potentially develop a nuanced understanding of complex social, cultural, and ecological issues. It is crucial that we continue to advocate for the integration of field experiences into standard curriculum and degree programs. Local- and regional-based field experiences are continuously threatened by a number of factors, including budget efficiency models, technological advancements in virtual fieldtrip models (Stainfield et al. 2010), resources being shifted toward long-haul study-abroad programs (McGuinness and Simm 2005), and increasing faculty-service obligations, collectively producing an uncertain future concerning field trips and direct-experience education.

In the case of this particular trip, the direct experience of the landscape and interactions with local actors were essential to put the 2016 occupation and larger issues surrounding the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge into a broader context. It can be hard, for example, to understand how scientific practices produce contested landscapes, to consider the complications of the wild horse debate without seeing the animals move through the environment, or to acknowledge multiple perspectives on place without having direct conversations with people. Experiences like this one are important, not only to help students achieve a more meaningful connection to the top-



Figure 5.—Students at the top of South Steens Mountain. (Dan Barton photo)

ical course material and stronger personal relationships with both faculty and other students, but to remind faculty of what fundamentally matters in education: passion, introspection, wonder, disorientation, complication, heartbreak, joy. It is critical that geography faculty continue to advocate for field experiences at multiple administrative and curricular levels to ensure not only greater student success and engagement, but also transformative life experiences and deeper understandings of the world.



Figure 6.—Sunset from South Steens Campground. (Author photo)

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the Department of Geography and the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Science at Humboldt State University for funding this field learning experience; and Dr. Rosemary Sherriff and Dr. Dan Barton for co-leading the field trip and helping make arrangements. The author would also like to thank experts from Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Burns Paiute Tribe for volunteering their time to meet with us during our visit.

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