

Experiential Learning in Nature: New Zealand and Hawaii

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Our troop of twenty-three college students and two daring professors pulled into the parking lot at the edge of Lake Wanaka formed 10,000 years ago by a slow moving glacier. This would be a brief stop halfway between Queenstown and Mt. Aspiring National Park, and the chosen spot for our next student presentation. In the previous ten days, other students informed the group about climate zones and political climates, global-warming and glacier recession, the importance of birds in the native culture, and a host of other social and environmental topics. As we took our seats on the grass facing the fiercely windswept lake and tightened the hoods of our jackets, the student began carefully explaining the three major

sources of weathering. She pointed backward at the valley we had just traveled through, noting the u-shaped entrance, a tell-tale sign of the glacier that once covered the valley from mountain to sea. She showed us the marks on the valley walls cut by the ice as we looked side to side. Pointing further up the valley to the river's edge, she explained the progression from boulder to pebble. Finally, the wind, which by this time was making its way through our jackets, was giving its own demonstration on the lake kicking up noisy waves and spray that almost reached us.

The student was the “expert”, choosing a topic she knew little about months earlier, and now deftly explaining what she and all of us were actually experiencing. She was part of a travel course during a short January semester to study scientific and indigenous perspectives of the Earth in New Zealand and Hawaii. Students with majors across campus and equally varied outdoor experiences joined a physics professor and an intercultural communications professor to study these two “young” landmasses and their original inhabitants. For three weeks, we traveled on foot over ridges and glaciers, in inner tubes through an underground stream, in kayaks through sounds and lagoons, and in buses to villages and observatories above the clouds.



The course was structured to give students a broad understanding of cultural and scientific bases of knowledge that would prepare them to interact with both “scientists” and native peoples, and to think in complex ways about compelling issues facing the people and land in these Polynesian islands. The underlying premise was simple: don’t just learn about it, but experience it. As one student put it, “... I actually see the volcano, the marae [Maori meeting house], the cliffs, the plant, the bird....they are learning experiences unmatched by books and lectures.” Students were also impressed by local people’s knowledge of natural sites, and, at times, taken aback by conservation efforts such as timed showers. In the end, both pleasures and perils were unique, personal educational experiences. Another student wrote in her course journal, “I have learned so much about two cultures, western culture, science, and myself.”

Please see the course syllabus “The Earth: Scientific and Cultural Perspectives in the Pacific” for more details.

<http://esse21.usra.edu/syllabi/AustinHWC201Syllabus.pdf>

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