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## **Galapagos Youth to Study in Yellowstone with Ecology Project International: International Students Will Aid Local Scientists in Conservation Research**

Missoula, MT, July 27, 2010– A select group of nine high school students from the Galapagos Islands of Ecuador will participate in field research and habitat restoration with conservation education non-profit Ecology Project International (EPI) for nine days, from Sunday, August 15<sup>th</sup> through Monday, August 23. This marks the first time these students have left their country. They will be immersed in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE), camping and collecting data on the great predators and threatened species like the whitebark pine with US Forest Service researchers, along with US Fish & Wildlife and The Nature Conservancy.

The Galapagos students are already experienced in conservation and field research through participation in EPI's conservation education program on the Islands, ongoing since 2003. They have helped secure the future of the iconic and endangered giant land tortoise, and remove invasive species that are threatening the entire ecosystem. In the process, students learn science through EPI's hands-on learning program, and gain awareness of conservation issues at home and how they can be a part of the solution, by working with Galapagos National Park and other conservation organizations to stimulate local involvement in conservation leadership. The science lessons are coordinated with the country's education syllabus to provide more experiential learning opportunities to under-served youth and improve science literacy rates.

All of EPI's programs in Galapagos, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Montana include a cultural exchange component, in addition to the science education and conservation aspects. The Galapagos students will be the second international group to participate in the Yellowstone Program. Typically, US students travel to EPI's programs in Latin America, but last year, a group of Costa Rican students broke the mold and were first group of EPI's Latin American students in the Yellowstone Wildlife Ecology Program.

Like Galapagos, Yellowstone is unique, both in terms of its history, as well as in its present function as the last remaining intact predator-prey ecosystem in the continental United States. However, due to development and land-use issues, the very wildlife that made this area famous is under serious threat. Grizzly bears, briefly delisted from the threatened species list, are once again listed under the Endangered Species Act. Fire-suppression efforts are changing the growth of native plants and trees, resulting in a declining population of bluebirds. Warming trends are leading to higher pine beetle and blister rust infestation of whitebark pine trees (an important source of food for grizzlies), while making snowshoe hares more susceptible to predation due to the lack of snow cover. Migrating species like the pronghorn

are struggling to maintain their ancient migration routes due to residential development, oil and gas drilling, and the proliferation of fences.

EPI's Yellowstone Wildlife Ecology Program seeks to address these issues by engaging local and visiting youth and their teachers in field courses in which they gain science skills, understand conservation issues from a range of perspectives, and contribute to research projects that directly improve conservation efforts. As local students discover the wonders existing in their backyard, they become inspired to protect them, and gain a deeper appreciation for where they live. When visiting students experience an environment completely unlike their own, they realize that their daily choices affect peoples and ecosystems thousands of miles away and learn life-long lessons about collaboration and respect.

Thanks to a grant from the National Forest Foundation and individual donations, EPI was able to provide scholarships for the Galapagos students to participate in the Yellowstone Program. The vast majority of EPI's participants come from rural communities, and EPI's scholarship fund ensures that youth, especially local, have the opportunity to learn science and be engaged in the wonders of the natural world.

EPI co-founders Scott Pankratz and Julie Osborn launched the first EPI course in 2000, involving 61 local Costa Rica youth and their teachers. EPI celebrates its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. To date, more than 6,000 people have participated in EPI's programs in the Galapagos Islands, Ecuador; Costa Rica; the Sea of Cortez in Mexico; and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem in the U.S. For more information about EPI's work fostering conservation for the next generation in Montana and internationally, visit <http://www.ecologyproject.org>, call (406) 721-8784, or email [info@ecologyproject.org](mailto:info@ecologyproject.org).

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