



CONTACT: Kelsey Stamm

kelsey@ecologyproject.org

(w) 406-721-8784

(c) 406-531-9137

World Wildlife Fund Awards Ecology Project International \$10,000: For Galapagos Youth to Study Yellowstone Wildlife

August 25, 2010, Missoula, MT – On August 15th, nine Galapagos high school students and their teacher arrived in Bozeman, Montana to participate in research and conservation service work with non-profit, Ecology Project International (EPI). Thanks to a grant from the Galapagos Marine Biodiversity Fund (operated by the World Wildlife Fund, and their partners, Ecoventura and Aerogal) and the National Forest Foundation, these Galapagos youth got the opportunity to travel for the first time from their country, helping professional researchers collect data in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and Centennial Valley in Montana.

The Galapagueños spent 12 days camping in the Yellowstone area around Gardener and Cooke City, as a part of EPI's Yellowstone Wildlife Ecology Program. During this experiential education course, students help researchers from the US Forest Service monitor grizzly bears and whitebark pine, aid US Fish & Wildlife in a bluebird population study, and help the Nature Conservancy with habitat restoration.

"I always wanted to be a doctor, but thanks to this course I understand that biology and conservation is for me. I hope to find a scholarship and return to America to study," said Galapagos student, Donald Navarrete.

Typically, Montana youth and others from around the US enroll in EPI's Yellowstone Program. However, this year, Galapagos student alumni (who participated in EPI's Galapagos Ecology Program in the spring) were able to study wildlife and ecosystems completely unlike anything they have ever experienced. This trip exposed them to predators of a size they had never before seen, and gave them a chance to experience western Montana culture and history. Many students expressed interest in pursuing advanced education in biology after the course, and were clearly moved by the Montana experience.

"The course was the greatest thing in all my life," says Pablo Alcivar.

When the students return to the Galapagos Islands, they will visit with local Galapagos newspaper and television journalists, sharing what they learned on course in Montana and showing video footage. Then they will give talks in schools about their experience, as well as presenting reports on their trip, describing Yellowstone, comparing the ecosystems in Montana and Galapagos, and conducting an in-depth study one species found in Montana. These will be presented to their peers and teachers within their schools.

“Hearing these kids talk about the beauty and wonder of Montana, while knowing that their reference point is the Galapagos Islands makes you realize the power of this course and also how lucky we are to live in this great state,” says EPI’s Executive Director and Co-Founder, Scott Pankratz.

In addition to the Yellowstone and Galapagos programs, EPI also offers conservation education courses to high school youth in Costa Rica and Baja California, Mexico. The majority of the students who participate are local to the site. This year, EPI celebrates its 10th anniversary, since Co-Founders Scott Pankratz and Julie Osborn took their first group of local kids to study leatherback sea turtles in Costa Rica. Now, EPI has involved over 6,000 youth in their programs, mainly from Latin America and the US; most come from underserved, rural communities with few resources. For more information about EPI and its programs, visit www.ecologyproject.org or call (406) 721-8784.

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