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Above, Suzanne Gray works with youths through Olympic Park Institute.

At right, Darek Staab, field research project manager from Olympic Park Institute, oversees the Elwha Science Education Project to document the river's ecosystem.



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Project gets teens out in the field

Peninsula students study Elwha River plan's effects

By VANESSA RENÉE CASAVANT
PENINSULA DAILY NEWS

With history happening in their backyard, students across the North Olympic Peninsula are getting a hands-on experience in the Elwha River dam removal project.

Both the Elwha and Glines Canyon dams are set for removal in 2009 to restore the Elwha River's ecosystem.

It's the largest dam removal project ever in the United States, and thanks to a \$30,000 grant from the Russell Family Foundation, as many as 200 middle and high school students will be able to take part in the Olympic Park Institute's Elwha Science Education Project.

Olympic Park Institute is a 30-year-old nonprofit education organization located about 20 miles from Port Angeles on the south side of Lake Crescent in Olympic National Park.

The organization's Elwha Science Education Project allows students to get out of the classroom and do field research on self-chosen topics of how

removing the dams will affect the river's ecosystem.

"It's a different approach to learning," said Jason Winters, an instructor with Olympic Park Institute who takes students on a four-day field trip starting at the top of the river by Glines Canyon Dam and ending at its mouth by the Lower Elwha Klallam Reservation.

About a dozen students from Choice Community School in Port Angeles completed their four-day field trip this week and are researching topics that range from the relationship between the speed of water and amount of oxygen it holds to the different types of mammals and vegetation living in the river's ecosystem.

Choice Community School is one of six schools on the North Olympic Peninsula participating in the program, and its students will present their findings in a speech at the school's library in May or through a written report for the project's Web site at www.elwhascienceed.org.



Students from Choice Community School in Port Angeles, Nikki Kruse, left, Holly Harwell and Danielle Della, work as a team to record the data they collected from the Lower Elwha River.

Winters and his colleague Suzanne Gray said they try to impress upon students that the topics they choose to research are real and currently being studied by scientists.

Winters and Gray said this usually creates a sense of excitement and meaning to what the students are doing.

Even if students don't develop the best study questions, they still stand to learn a great deal about the link between science and society, said

Darek Staab, the field research project manager for Olympic Park Institute.

Exploring where they live

For many of the students taking part in the project, the field trip is one of the first times they've been able to explore the area where they live, said Deb Volturno, the science and math teacher at Choice Community School. Susan MacDonald, the English and life skills teacher at Choice who's joined forces with Volturno to work on the project with students, said it's amazing to watch students develop a sense of wonder about the area where they live, and open their minds to new ideas.

Volturno and MacDonald said some of the students have started hiking in their free time while others are intrigued at the idea of going to college to study environmental science.

"The kids are thanking us for bringing them out," Volturno said.

Staab said there is still grant money left for more students to participate in the project and that Olympic Park Institute is excited to introduce more students to the dam removal project.

Studies on the effects of the dams' removal will continue for years, Staab said, presenting an opportunity for high school students interested in studying environmental science in college.

He said it was neat to think that some middle and high school students participating in the project might get a chance to study the removal project from start to finish during their college and graduate studies.

For more information on the Elwha Science Education Project or other programs offered by Olympic Park Institute, visit www.yni.org/lopi on the Internet or call 360-928-3720.

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Logan Mead heaves a log into the Elwha River so observers in his team can time the float over a measured course to determine the speed of water in the river.



A rock is measured by a student along the Elwha River bank to determine the average rock size in the test area.