

# Educators Get Hands On Experiences Learning About Natural Resources Jobs

August 2024  
by Lauren Brown



In June, about 20 educators from around Eastern Oregon had the opportunity to participate in four days of activities centered around careers in natural resources.

The externship took place June 24-27 and was hosted by Treasure Valley Community College and co-sponsored by the Eastern Oregon Workforce Board, High Desert Partnership, Intermountain Education Service District and GO-STEM, the Greater Oregon Science, Technology, Engineering & Math hub based at Eastern Oregon University. Field trips took the participants to Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, Vale and Ontario and served to demonstrate hands-on skills needed in different positions ranging from forestry to fisheries.

Marcus Nichols, an instructor in the Ag and Natural Resources Department at Treasure Valley Community College, was heavily involved with organizing the

externship and scheduling the field trips. “Essentially, the intent was to expose teachers to different workplace environments that they might not have ever experienced and to give them a one-week experience of what it’s like to work in a different industry,” he said.

Nichols said the idea to focus on natural resource-based careers came from a survey the High Desert Partnership did during a youth summit a few years ago. The feedback from participants indicated that they really didn’t have a lot of knowledge of or exposure to those fields. Nichols said that in rural Central and Eastern Oregon towns, natural resource agencies can be some of the biggest employers with some of the best paying positions. “I thought it was really important that we do something with that information and try to move the dial a little bit toward more knowledge and maybe more exposure at the high school level,” Nichols said. He worked with Brenda Smith, executive director of the High Desert Partnership, and many others to make this natural resource educator externship happen.

## Different perspectives

Connie Robbins, a science and art teacher at Crane Union High School, decided to participate in the externship because she hoped she would learn something she could bring back to her students. Having worked for the Forest Service during the summer for eight years, she knew quite a bit about that portion of the externship, but she appreciated getting to see the other facets of natural resource careers. For example, during a visit to Phillips Reservoir with the Forest Service, the group got to hear from a contractor who was doing logging work there. “It was really cool to be able to see all sides of the circumstances, not just what the Forest Service does,” she said.

Many of her students at Crane come from ranching and farming backgrounds and already have some of the skills that would pertain to a job in natural resources. She said that the federal government is one component of agriculture in that ranchers are often permittees in the forest or on Bureau of Land Management land. “To be able to have kids see a different side of that, I think, would really benefit them as ranchers and farmers, too,” she said.

## Skills-career connection



John Stroup is a Career and Technical Education Career Connection Coordinator and works throughout Eastern Oregon in six counties, including Harney County. His primary role is to support school districts with career-connected learning programs and coordinate work-based learning opportunities for students. When Nichols asked him to help get the word out to educators in Eastern Oregon, he was happy to broadcast the opportunity to the school districts and teachers in this region.

During the externship, the repeated theme he heard from employers was that there is currently a high demand for employees from entry-level to managerial to administrative positions.

As a participant, that theme resonated with Robbins too. “I did not realize that they were so hurting for help and wanting people to apply,” she said.

Stroup also hopes that instructors took from the externship that, whether one teaches math, science, PE or agriculture, they could be teaching a career component with each subject. “When you attach a career outcome to algebra it now becomes relevant for the student why they need to learn that subject, he said. Robbins said another practical part of the externship was learning how to navigate the USA Jobs website so she can better help students who are interested in those careers.

### Fisheries

Dominic Bachman, aquatic biologist for the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, was involved with the planning calls and logistics of the externship. When the group visited the refuge, he talked about careers in fisheries and showed them how the fish screens and fish passage worked. They also talked about irrigation diversions, got to see invasive species like the common carp, and discussed how carp affect the wetlands and birds. “We showed them hands-on fish management including lethal removal of invasive species,” he said.

While there was some listening and note-taking, Robbins said the hands-on aspect of the externship was useful. “At the refuge, we got to pull fish and find the trout and put them back in and pull the carp out of the trap at the dam,” she said. “Then on the last day we went to the Snake River with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife crew. We got to shock fish. That was pretty fun.”

### Making connections

Nichols said that it was nice to connect with fellow educators during the bus rides on the field trips. “It was exciting to get to know them, and then after they got to do something really neat, like hold a 25-pound catfish that they just shocked out of the Snake River, it was fun to interact with them and give them the same experiences that I give my students,” he said.

Nichols helped organize this externship to bring greater awareness to careers in natural resources, a subject that he is passionate about. “My hope is that they will take that knowledge and bring it back to the classroom and hopefully get some students who might not have considered going into that field excited about being a wildland firefighter, a forester, or a biologist someday,” he said.

Stroup noted that it’s a lot of work to plan events like this, but he feels more externships are needed. “I appreciate the educators and industry partners who made this event happen. It boils down to how we can innovate to bring opportunities for success to our students, who, by the way, are our next generation of skilled labor and leaders,” he said.

Robbins met Nichols for the first time during the externship and was impressed with his expertise in natural resources and his enthusiasm with helping students get into the field. “I’ll be happy to send kids his way because he really is passionate

about what he does and passionate about getting kids interested in natural resources,” she said. “I thought they did a really good job of having all the agencies represented with a mindfulness of Eastern Oregon and the kids that we teach. I think it was done really well that way,” Robbins said.

*This article is provided by High Desert Partnership; a Harney County nonprofit convening and supporting six collaboratives in Southeast Oregon.*

