

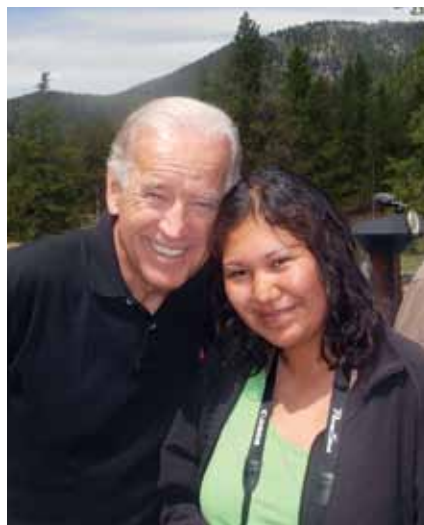
Native American Student Intern Partnership

A Yellowstone Science Interview

IN 2009, YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK and the University of Montana formed a partnership through the National Park Service's Rocky Mountains Cooperative Ecosystems Studies Unit to launch a Native American student employment pilot program. The program was intended to assist the park in developing a diverse workforce by placing Native American college students in Yellowstone for the summer to work in fields that would both advance the students' goals and assist the park with much needed work.

Students are recruited through the Native American Natural Resources Program at the University of Montana and work with park staff. Pre-employment training is provided by the University of Montana to the students through a semester-long seminar directed at potential challenges related to the merging of Native American cultures with the organizational culture of the National Park Service (NPS). Associated Yellowstone staff are coached to identify ways the park can better recruit and retain Native American college students into the workforce.

In summer 2010, the first program participant, Monica Lomahuklah, now a junior studying resource conservation, came to Yellowstone to work in the natural resources field for 12 weeks. During her internship, Monica had a variety of fieldwork experiences and contributed 500 hours of work to the Yellowstone Center for Resource's vegetation, bison, wolf, fish, air quality, pika, GIS/Spatial Analysis Center, and research permitting programs. She attended park orientations and division meetings, completed an internship taskbook, and completed online training to learn more about the "big picture" operations of the park and the NPS. Monica also offered constructive criticism that will help the park better run this internship program. All involved believe that the first summer was a great start for how to model this program in the future. In summer 2011, the program expanded to include three internships, with opportunities in cultural resources and interpretation in addition to natural resources.



Vice President Joe Biden with intern Monica Lomahuklah during his 2010 visit to Yellowstone.

Yellowstone Science (YS): When we last talked to you, you were on your way back to Missoula for school. How did it go?

Monica Lomahuklah (ML): School went great. I took difficult classes along with ones that were relaxing. It was a very good mix.

YS: Everyone we talked to enjoyed spending time and working with you last summer. Yellowstone attracts people from all over the country and the world who want to work here. Why were you interested in working with the NPS for the summer?

ML: I was interested because Rachel Smith, who is the program leader for the Native American Natural Resource Program, said I was a great candidate for the internship. Actually, she said that I was the only one she knew that was qualified for the internship. My grandparents and parents worked for the park service and I want to follow in their footsteps, especially my grandfathers'.

YS: What were you most interested in studying or working with when you began your internship?

ML: I actually had no idea of what kind of work I was going to do. I was the first intern to do the internship. So I was the guinea pig of the whole program. Although, everything I did during the internship was so much fun. My interest is in studying is plants. I love plants but I actually want to learn more about fungi. Unfortunately, the University of Montana doesn't offer a course on fungi so I learned from the people I worked with.

YS: What was it like getting to experience nearly every natural resource management topic—from plants to wolves—that is part of the park's natural resources program?

ML: It was amazing. I felt so lucky. I also felt spoiled because not many people actually get to do a little of everything in a national park. I learned so much, from what I want to do in the future to how to handle meeting new people.

YS: What was your best experience? What experience could you have done without?

ML: My best experience was working with the pika crew, backpacking for a week at Heart Lake and staying at the fire lookout at Mount Sheridan. The people I worked with during that time were extremely welcoming and very funny. They were amazing hikers so I got a workout. I have no complaints.

YS: What do you wish we would have told you before you started?

ML: That the laundry machines in the dorm cost you a dollar in quarters. I would have liked more information on housing and what I was going to do for the job.

YS: One of the benefits of working for a national park is often living in it. What was it like living in Yellowstone? Did you find a favorite place?

ML: I witnessed a bear take out an elk calf the first weekend about 70 feet away from my housing area. I hiked every single work day and sometimes every single day of the week. Having Yellowstone as my backyard was incredible and never boring. My favorite place was anywhere in the backcountry.

YS: How did you contribute to the NPS and Yellowstone this summer?

ML: I contributed by helping out people who needed extra help on their projects.

YS: Did school help you prepare for this experience?

ML: Before I started the internship I took a class about Native Americans and the national parks. I learned what the Native Americans had to go through for their land and how hard they had to fight for it—but in the end lost all of the land. Other than that class, I did not have much preparation besides swimming to get in shape.



COURTESY OF M. LOMAHUKILAH

Monica (bottom, front) helped the Research Permit Office monitor a graduate project on vegetation in thermal areas.

YS: Was there anything that surprised you about working in a national park?

ML: I knew that I would have deal with people but it kind of got overwhelming. There were some ridiculous questions that got asked and sometimes it was hard not to laugh. It was hard to get the tourists to listen to me. I felt like I was not taken seriously by the visitors because of my age. I would tell a visitor to not do something, and after I left they'd go back to what they were doing.

YS: What was it like working for the federal government?

ML: I actually got paid through the University of Montana, but having a glimpse of what it was like was very nice. I really enjoyed working four days out of the week for ten hours. The three day weekends were nice.

YS: How do you think this internship has shaped your academic and professional career path?

ML: The experience showed me that I want to learn more about mushrooms because I saw so many in Yellowstone.

YS: How does your experience as an intern compare to your other work experiences? Did you develop any new skills?

ML: I did not feel like an intern. I felt like I actually worked for the park service. I learned more about wildlife safety. Being a much better hiker as well as being more aware of my surroundings while hiking.

YS: What was your biggest accomplishment this summer?

ML: Hiking over 400 miles during the whole summer.

YS: Is there anything you wish you would have done that you did not get to do over the summer?

ML: I wish I could have gotten more backcountry backpacking in during the summer.

YS: You got to meet Vice President Joe Biden while he was here. What was that like?

ML: It was such an experience. We had to wait for a while to meet him but while waiting we got to see a moose. He had a great speech and I got to shake his hand and pose for a picture. He was really nice with all smiles.

YS: What advice do you have for the next intern?

ML: I would tell the next intern that they need to be able to hike in any kind of situation and flexible because some of the jobs that you are working on will not go according to plan.

YS: Is there anything else you'd like to say?

ML: Thanks for giving me this kind of experience.

Monica returned to Yellowstone in summer 2011 as a seasonal National Park Service employee. She is working with park botanists in the vegetation program documenting the occurrence of rare plants in Yellowstone.

YS