

National Collegiate Honors Council/National Park Service: Partners in the Parks: Exploring the High Plains

William V. Glider¹ Leilani Arthurs², and Jon Garbisch¹

¹ School of Biological Science, University of Nebraska- Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 68588

² Department of Geology, University of Colorado-Boulder, Boulder, CO 80309



Partners in the Parks (PITP)

Partners in the Parks is an outdoor experiential learning program coordinated by the National Collegiate Honors Council. PITP projects involve a partnership with any entity operated by the National Park Service, including national parks, monuments, and scenic rivers across the country. These experiential excursions offer unique opportunities for collegiate honors students and faculty to visit areas of the American landscape noted for their beauty, significance and lasting value. The first project was organized in 2007. Since then NCHC has sponsored 66 projects at 37 different parks for over 500 student participants. Informational sessions led by university faculty and park personnel include historical, scientific, cultural, and other important areas unique to a given park. Projects also take advantage of recreational opportunities in the parks to broaden participant's understanding of the overall value of national parks to our country and its citizens. NCHC offers scholarships for every PITP project. The High Plains project was held June 9-16, 2018.

Western High Plains

Biodiversity and Geology

The western High Plains is a unique region of mixed-grass, tall-grass, and sand hills prairie where six major ecosystems converge due to unique geology and geography, giving the region the name "biological crossroads." The western high plains are underlain with a massive ramp of sediment that extends from the Rocky Mountains to the east, almost to the eastern edges of South Dakota, Nebraska and Kansas. This sediment contains one of North America's largest aquifers providing the water resources for a significant percentage of food production in North America. Water, elevation and sediment controls patterns of biodiversity across the high plains.

Indigenous Peoples

This project also provided the students an excellent opportunity to learn about the Lakota Indians which are considered a first nation of North America. The Lakota Indian's primary location is in South and North Dakota. The Lakota Indians can be traced back to the Lewis and Clark expedition. During this time, the Lakota tribe inhabited much of the Great Plains. Because of ongoing warfare, the tribal group was forced northward and settled in the Dakotas.

The Ranger Connection

A common practice for the various PITP projects is including discussions, activities, and presentations by park staff. These form the foundation of the partnership. In addition, the rangers often provide the students with the personal sacrifices and rewards inherent in a career with the NPS.



Interpretive Ranger and Paleontologist at Badlands National Park. "The Birth of American Paleontology occurred at Badlands National Park."

Niobrara National Scenic River

The Niobrara River meanders 122 km through north-central Nebraska. The western section, with its rocky riverbed.



Mt. Rushmore National Memorial



Oglala Lakota College

Oglala Lakota College was chartered by the Oglala Sioux Tribe in 1971. Its mission and goals are to provide qualified and skilled human resources for the Oglala Sioux Tribe in its development efforts, to improve the quality of life for individuals, and to enhance and revitalize Oglala culture. In addition to providing an in-depth overview of the college, the staff provided our group with a sampling of traditional Lakota food.



Badlands National Park



Minuteman Missile National Historic Site



Wind Cave National Park

Wind Cave is one of the most complex maze caves in the world. Unique formations include cave popcorn, frostwork and boxwork, a formation rarely found in other caves.



Wild Cave Tour

The Wild Cave Tour allows participants to explore the cave away from developed trails and to learn the basics of safe caving as well as to see many of Wind Cave's common formation. Since much of the excursion includes crawling, hard hats, light and kneepads are provided.



Student Testimonials

"The scenery and educational opportunities were amazing; especially loved the opportunity for us to interact with the Park Rangers and our outdoor activities (hikes, kayaking, and cave exploration)."

"I am really happy with this trip, the memories we made, for my friends across the country."

"I really enjoyed the parks we visited and gained a new appreciation for plains landscape of America."

"Thank you for incorporating several places of Native American history and culture, it meant a lot to me."

References and Contacts

NCHC website
<https://www.nchchonors.org/events/partners-in-the-parks>

Link to PITP Manual pdf download:
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchcmono/26/>

Author's email address: wglider1@unl.edu