

Prescott College:

Students at Arizona school make nature, the world their classroom

By KRIS MAYES

State Press, Arizona State U.

Tucked away in a quiet central Arizona town, hundreds of miles away from the state's crowded, research-crazed universities, is a tiny college that has found an educational utopia through nature.

Prescott College, an environmentally based liberal arts college with 315 residential students, shies away from the seductive pull of federal research money and pricey facilities in favor of personal instruction and a hands-on environmental experience.

Spurred by a growing national environmental consciousness, students there are waking up to Prescott's alternative method of education.

"The environmental ethic began 20 years ago, and it has taken awhile for that to become part of societal consciousness," said Mark Riesner, Prescott's environmental director. "The rest of the world is catching up to us."

Students at Prescott take courses with a heavy emphasis on field study, a focus they say makes the world their classroom.

"I've always been fascinated by wilderness and nature," said Christian Petrovich, a senior studying ecological conservation. "It's endlessly thrilling to be able to go out and look at something and then share those observations with other people."

"It just came to me one day that I wanted to do research in Costa Rica," said Leah Day, a senior concentrating on outdoor education and creative communication. "Within a week I was going. That's the epitome of Prescott College."

A random sampling of Prescott's course offering heralds such specialized courses as Sea Kayaking and Marine Landscapes, Explorations in the Sierra Madre, Mexico, and even the traditional Economic

Principles and Computer Applications.

Also contributing to the school's reputation as an alternative-method college is the 17-day wilderness orientation program each new student must enter before beginning at Prescott.

In addition, new Prescott students are asked to design their own educations — determining a program of study tailored to their interests.

"There's a lot of trust in the students that they know what's best for them," Petrovich said.

He added, "I didn't want to wait years to start doing what I'm going to do. This school lets me start now."

Petrovich said the ability to impact social attitudes about the natural world makes Prescott the ultimate educational experience.

"It all comes from nature," he said. "And we want to bring everything in nature back to society."

Droves of prospective students are hoping to nab a much sought-after place on the school's roster.

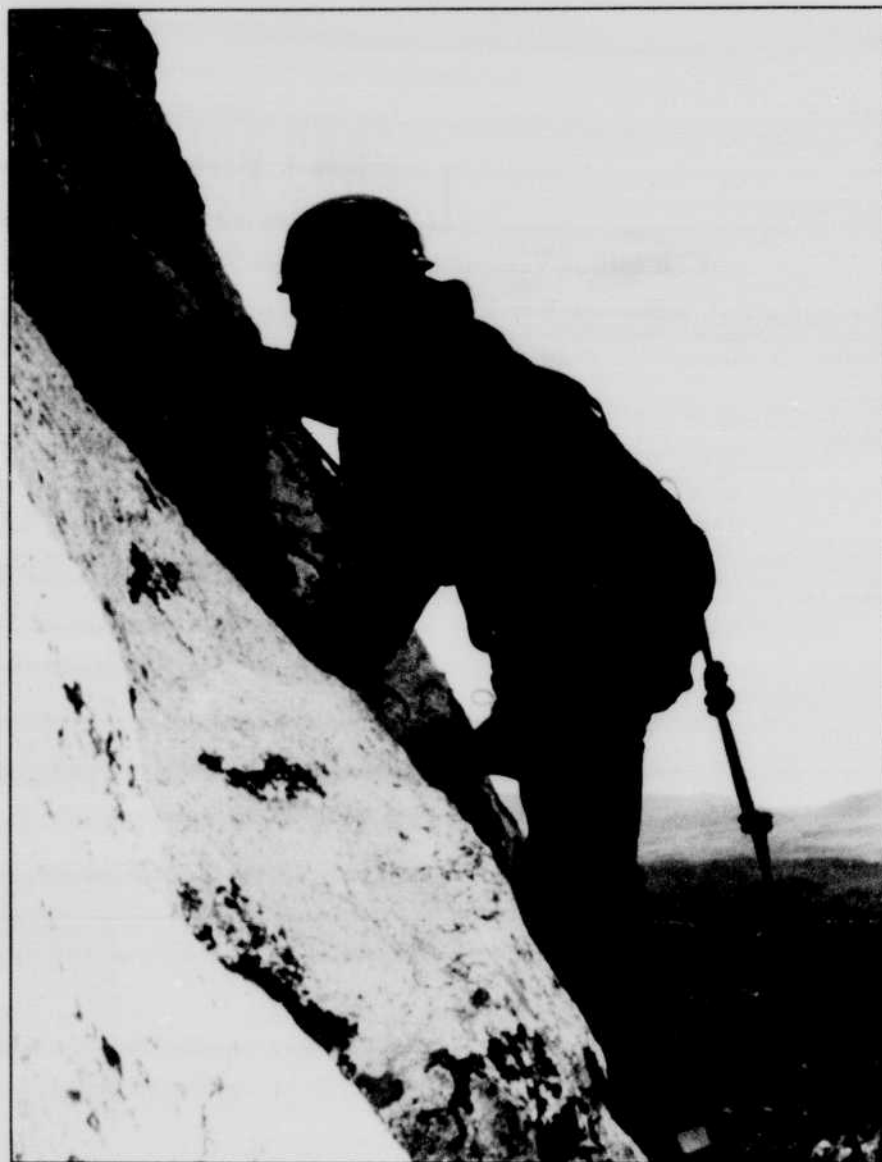
Last year, nearly 500 applicants competed for 120 slots — a dramatic increase from past years, said Derk Janssen, director of admissions and marketing.

Still, some Prescott faculty, like ecology professor Carl Tomoff, can remember a not-so-rosy time in the chronicles of Prescott.

Tomoff was getting his start at Prescott in 1974 when overly ambitious expansion plans and a national recession forced the college into bankruptcy and pushed it perilously close to extinction.

"The commitment of individuals to the ideals of the school kept us going," Tomoff said. "We had most of the faculty stay through the final quarter."

Only a handful of professors then remained at the nearly-defunct college,



SEAN OPENSHAW, STATE PRESS, ARIZONA STATE U.

Students at Prescott College in Arizona are encouraged to tailor their curriculum toward their own needs. Prescott is predominately a liberal arts college that emphasizes environmental concerns.

teaching for close to three years without pay in the basement of a local hotel.

But gradually, throughout a nine-year period, Prescott began to rebound.

The recovery culminated with full reaccreditation and small-scale campus expansion.

Prescott President Doug North called the

recovery a miracle, giving credit to Tomoff and other staff members who remained at the college during its lowest period. It was a period that many thought Prescott would never live through.

"In a way, that's a miracle," said North, a Yale graduate. "They did it by keeping alive the ideal."

Environmental curricula promoted by universities

By MIKE GREBB

The Post, Ohio U.

To hug trees or not to hug trees?

That's the stereotypical question, but some say growing trends prove that students worried about the environment are doing more than embracing redwoods and breaking in their Birkenstocks.

Universities are taking environmentalism more seriously than ever, offering majors specifically geared toward Earth-conscious students.

"The opportunities are absolutely terrific," said Mike Anderson, professor of environmental resources engineering at Humboldt State U. in California. "The demand is just so great right now."

Although that hasn't always been true, many students are pursuing degrees that help them and their environment.

Connie Roberts, a senior at HSU, switched from geology to environmental engineering her sophomore year, a move that worried her father.

"He assumed because it had 'environmental' in it, it was flaky," she said. But after he flipped through the course



WILLIAM LUTHER, THE POST, OHIO U.

Environmental hikes, like this at Ohio U., are now common.

book, dripping with math and science classes, his fears subsided.

Majoring in environmental studies has proven lucrative for HSU graduates.

According to Alden Burrows, chairman of the department of environmental resources at HSU, only 138 students nationwide graduated last year with a degree in

environmental engineering — 35 of those students were from Humboldt.

"It's the major of the '90s," said Ian Worley, assistant director of the U. of Vermont's environmental program. "It's the hot thing, the fun thing, to do."

So fun in fact that students are jumping at many of the environmentally conscious class curricula offered around the country.

Chad Kister, a junior at Ohio U., is part of an honors program that allows him to take a myriad of classes about the environment.

He hiked through the Alaskan tundra last summer, rubbing noses with the polar bears. Students at schools like U. of Washington, Syracuse U., Sterling College, U. of California, Davis, and many others are getting practical experience working on environmental studies programs.

"In the past few years, there's been a tremendous growth of interest in the environment," said professor Sy Schwartz of the UC, Davis. "And that interest is increasing at a rapid rate."

Kristina Sauerwein of The Daily Orange, Syracuse U. contributed to this story.