

# Desert education: an experience to remember



PHOTO BY BOB PORTER

Twenty-eight students, three instructors and three honored guests braved the desert over spring break for The Natural History of the SW Desert class. The students, brought together by their interest in science, explored the history, flat lands, hills, vegetation and wildlife of Death Valley National Park.

MEGAN OLDENSTADT  
Managing Editor

What happens when you get 35 people together with a common goal in mind...They have a kick-ass time.

Over spring break (March 16-25) I went to Death Valley, located in California with some of the most amazing people I have ever met.

The adventure was led by John Snively, a geology instructor (see profile below), Jennifer Porter, a biology instructor and Bill Guthrie, a friend of the science department.

The Natural History of SW

Deserts - yes it is a graded class- is an on-site study of the plants, animals, geology, and environmental issues of the Mojave and Great Basin Deserts of the Western United States.

Ok, now that the basics are out of the way, let me tell you what the trip is really about. It is about loving science, learning about yourself and creating lasting memories.

It takes two days of driving through Nevada (more than 900 miles) to reach the national park known as Death Valley. Five days are spent camping in a canyon lo-

cated in the park. And two days driving home.

Our days were spent learning. Birds and plants were identified, rock formations analyzed and canyons were explored. The nights were devoted to dinner, summarizing our daily activities in our journals, and chatting around the fire.

The weather was nice, the sun was hot and the wind, well I think "windy" is an understatement.

The wind decided to play games with us one night. I don't think anyone got much sleep, because it's hard to sleep when your tent is pelt-

ing you in the head for hours on end.

We flattened the tents the following day, because the wind will rip them to shreds. Several tents were lost that night (and will be dearly missed). The following night, people crowded in the vans or on picnic tables to sleep. Several people braved putting their tents back up, but the majority of them stayed flattened.

Besides learning about the area, making new friends and soaking up the sun, creativity snuck up on us. Poets, song writers and musicians

crept their way out of the rocks and dazzled us with their talent (see following page).

This was an experience I can hardly start to explain in so few words. I can't even come close to giving justice to something that truly changed me.

If you want to find out more about this amazing trip, talk to John Snively, Jennifer Porter or any student who has gone on the trip over the last 25 years. I'm sure they will all tell you how one class, in the desert, can change someone's life forever.

## John Snively reveals nature's wonders through field trips



PHOTO BY MATT BROWN

John Snively, currently a geology teacher at Clackamas, makes learning fun through his hands-on field trips, especially the spring break Death Valley Trek.

PATTYE ZENSEN  
Contributing Writer

Clackamas geology teacher John Snively knows why volcanoes erupt, what makes the earth shake and where the Columbia River once flowed.

He will gladly share this information with anyone who takes one of his geology classes, which he refers to as "the science classes where you don't need math," making them popular with the non-science as well as science majors.

To be a teacher was always

Snively's goal.

"I got my Bachelor of Science and thought about teaching high school," Snively said.

He enrolled in the teaching program at Portland State University and earned his teaching certificate. From there he taught at Beaverton High School, where he discovered that he enjoyed teaching and the kids liked him. Inspired by this successful endeavor, he attended graduate school at PSU, where he was a teaching assistant.

After he finished graduate

school roughly 25 years ago, Snively began teaching community college classes. He has taught at all the community colleges in the area, teaching as many classes as he could.

"I basically monopolized all the full-time jobs in the area," Snively commented. During that time he taught both geology and biology.

"I am a biologist, that's what I have my degree in, but I enjoy teaching both," he stated.

Snively began at Clackamas teaching biology part time. A part time geology position opened, so he added it to his schedule.

"Since I had been here the longest I got to do what I wanted," Snively said.

One of the highlights of the geology and biology programs for many students is the field trips Snively plans each year. These trips range from one day outings in the Columbia Gorge to a 10 day trip to Death Valley over spring break. Snively feels that for him the trips are the most rewarding part of teaching.

"To me, when I see people without focus go on the field trips and it all makes sense [to them], they change their majors." He notes that even the people who don't change their majors still gain some-

thing.

"They often see personal growth and gain maturity on the trips."

When asked how the annual Death Valley trek came about, Snively explained that in 1972, when he was a graduate student at PSU, he wanted to teach a course. However, the biology department would not allow their graduate students to teach. He asked his advisor and mentor Dr. Forbes to let him run a trip under his name and was given permission for a spring break field trip. Snively looked for a place to go, but soon realized that everywhere he wanted to go would be under snow in March. Death

Valley, the majority of it being in California, was a place they could go that time of year. He had never been there so he drove to Death Valley over winter break and spent a week learning about it. Snively took a group from PSU that year and since then has taken a group of students every single spring break for the

most rewarding parts of teaching, a down side does exist, the lack of motivation in some students.

"You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink. We have a lot of student horses. You keep giving them water, but they won't drink," stated Snively.

If there is one thing he hopes students get from his classes, it is an enrichment of their lives. He shows them the Earth, how it functions and where they fit in,

"People need to believe it to see it," is one of Snively's favorite sayings, and his classes are taught with that in mind.

In his time off, Snively runs tours to Peru or Costa Rica. He likes to go to the Arctic, Northwest Territories, The Yukon and British Columbia to run rivers in his canoe.

Snively is nearing his retirement. He says he might stop teaching in three to four years. He is not certain what he will do when he is no longer teaching, but feels traveling will be a factor. Next year Snively will take a year long sabbatical.



MEGAN OLDENSTADT/Clackamas Print

Snively shows the creation of the Valley in the sand dunes located in the Park.

past 25 years.

"I think I have taken more people to Death Valley than any other single person," he said.

While the field trips and the sparks he ignites in students are

