Alpine Ecology - video transcript 10/4/13

Narrator:

Victoria’s Alpine National Park is a unique ecological environment. Second and third year students studying in the Faculty of Science, Technology and Engineering at La Trobe University’s Albury-Wodonga and Melbourne campuses have the option to study an elective unit in Alpine Ecology. The subject involves a weeklong field trip to Falls Creek.

Dr Dennis Black:

In Wodonga we have a fair range of expertise in field biology in our department so we like to pass on as much of that experience as we can to our students. So through our degree programs we try and give them as many hands-on experiences as possible.

Narrator:

Students work in alpine and sub-alpine areas on the Bogong High Plains. For the 30 students on the camp its an opportunity to experience first-hand the work on an Ecologist in the field.

Assoc Prof. Phil Suter:

They get to put the knowledge that they’ve learnt in lectures into action, and they learn in fact all of a sudden the things they have learnt actually gels with them and they understand why its important to actually be in lecturers, so they learn quite a lot out there in the field.

Narrator:

In groups students embark on projects looking at different habitats found in the alpine ecosystem.

Dr Peter Pridmore:

We’re only catching the small mammals because that’s the procedures we’re using, we’re getting two species at the moment, we’re getting a small insect-eating marsupial, an antechinus, which is a lively little fellow and then we’re getting quite a few bush rats. The bush rats are native rodents, they’re part of the group of rodents that came into Australia probably around 5 million years ago from the north. The students are getting a couple of things out of this, they’re getting practical experience where they’re using the various techniques, the various kinds of traps in this case, the second thing they’re getting, they getting the chance to think about the design of field work and how you make comparisons, in this case between grass lands and snow gum woodlands.

Laura Reynolds:

You learn very good teamwork skills, and its very good fieldwork experience for what you want to do.

Narrator:

An important skill that students learn is project design.

Charlotte Klempin:

Well it’s been really great working in groups, especially with the lecturers. They really help you out and their knowledge is great and one thing I really enjoy is in your design you come up with a plan, and because you don’t really know what you are doing out in the field they’re really will to help you and design a plan to get the best out of the data.

Narrator:

Here on the Bogong High Plains in the region of Falls Creek, after effects of major bushfires that swept through the region in 2003 are still visible. One group has been comparing insect biodiversity between burnt and un-burnt areas. Short-term projects such as this one are well suited to conducting comparative studies.

Dr Alexei Rowles:

Right now they’re processing invertebrate samples both from black light traps where they collected through the night, mostly moths, and also invertebrate fauna that they have extracted from leaf litter.

Narrator:

The aquatic invertebrate group also conducted a comparative study sampling pools in the peat lowland areas and springs in the higher areas aiming to establish where the aquatic biodiversity differed.

Paul Jonas:

Every little pond that we sample is completely different to the other pond, so you can’t just point at an area and go well those animals live there and we understand that, its actually so complicated.

Narrator:

During the sampling process the students found an adult Scorpion Fly of an alpine species previously known only from immature specimens.

Assoc Prof. Phil Suter:

Particularly with the aquatic fauna up here there is no information really that is quantitative. So what they are doing is actually comparing different sites and getting information that we don’t have, so its base information and contributes to our knowledge of what happens in the Alps.

Narrator:

In addition to the student groups looking at mammals, terrestrial insects and aquatic invertebrates there were two other projects under way. One group investigated water chemistry, while the other looked at vegetation communities and their associated soil characteristics.

Dr Dennis Black:

I think there is a general trend in biology training to get away from doing field-work, but we in Wodonga feel that it’s extremely important to give biology students that hands-on training.

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