

Bigfoot Trail Youth Stewardship Project links communities along 360-mile path

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The Bigfoot Trail Alliance is launching the Bigfoot Trail Youth Stewardship Project to transform the Klamath Mountains into a learning laboratory to engage elementary, middle and high school students in experiential/place-based learning about watersheds, ecosystems, biodiversity, fire ecology and climate change.

Michael Kauffmann, board president of the Bigfoot Trail Alliance, will serve as the Project Director will work with regional nonprofits to creating a durable framework that establishes relationships between interested regional partners.

Currently six nonprofits are part of the team, including the Watershed Research & Training Center in Hayfork, Trinity Together in Weaverville, Scott Valley Watershed Council, Salmon River Restoration Council in Sawyer's Bar, Mid Klamath Watershed Council in Orleans and Smith River Alliance in Hiouchi.

Phase 1 has been generously funded by the S.H. Cowell Foundation, whose work is organized around a place-based grantmaking that improves the quality of life for children and families in small, rural communities in Northern California.

"I am excited to be a part of this project and see what educational needs arise from our survey," said Kauffmann. "In addition to creating new standards-based curriculum, we will provide youth with place-based

education. The classroom learning and field-based experiences will enhance student's environmental literacy and relationship to other communities across the Klamath Mountains."

Joshua Smith, the Watershed Stewardship Program Director at the Hayfork Watershed Research and Training Center, said the similar communities in the Klamath Mountain region separated by great distances across rugged mountains are connected by the unique forests, wild rivers and amazing trails.

"We partner with many of these NGO's on regional fire, fisheries and water projects and this project will be one more way to bring our organizations and communities closer together to achieve our ecological and community health goals," Smith said.

One of the linkages across this vast landscape is a long-distance hiking trail. The Bigfoot Trail is a 360-mile pathway created in 2009 using existing trails and roads, linked together to celebrate the regional biodiversity in the Klamath Mountains. The route has the potential to connect these rural communities both physically and psychically by building a network of groups interested in relationship building between young people from the communities and the wilderness around them while also introducing vocational possibilities to youth across the region.

"I'm excited to build on curriculum we already have in place and develop new curriculum for our communities," said Carol Earnest, Community & Stewardship Program Director at the Mid Klamath Watershed Council. "There is potential to develop citizen science projects that students across the Klamath Mountains can share with each other and learn more about other communities."

"This is a unique opportunity to connect non-profits across the region through project-based curriculum and outdoor experiences," added Patty McCleary, the executive director of the Smith River Alliance. "I am excited to support it, watch it develop and positively impact our region's youth."

To participate in the Bigfoot Trail Youth Stewardship Project need's assessment, go to www.bigfoottrail.org and follow the survey link or contact Michael Kauffmann at bfta@bigfoottrail.org to get involved or ask questions.