

Native American Youth Equine Connection

The Situation

Many Native American youth today are out of touch with their heritage and traditions which has caused an identity crisis. One of the high priorities of many Tribes is to encourage Elders and schools to take time to teach the children about the “old ways” and instill a sense of pride and identity. The horse was a major part of Native American history and still plays a vital role in enabling native youth to connect to their heritage of horsemanship.

The Cooperative Extension system, including Benewah County, historically has not served the Native American populations. The traditional 4-H club format is difficult to implement on reservations due to political, social and cultural barriers. However, there is a need for extension programs that specifically address and accommodate their needs and environment.

The Coeur D’Alene Tribe is a significant part of Benewah County and efforts are underway to provide extension programming to tribal youth.

Our Response

Extension has developed key contacts within the Coeur D’Alene Tribe’s Departments of Natural Resources, Education, and Youth Activities. The 4-H Horse clubs in the county have been contacted to host an “exchange” or sharing activity with non horse and tribal youth.

The Extension Educator was invited to teach at a tribal youth summer camp. Three horses were brought to camp to introduce 30 youth to horse behavior, safety & handling, grooming, tack, and the basics of riding. In addition, youth learned leadership and communication skills as they helped each other lead and ride a horse.

Accomplishments

Many youth who were fearful at the beginning of the workshop overcame their fear gaining confidence and pride as they each successfully groomed, picked up a foot, lead, mounted and rode a horse. The youth connection with these equine companions brought out the hidden inner strength and courage of each and every youth. This experience also empowered the youth to trust both horse and human. The excitement has carried on long after camp with a revived interest in horse related activities among the Coeur D’Alene youth and adults!

The Future

Future Extension programs will be conducted primarily as special interest youth activities. This summer there will be a historical ride and campout from DeSmet to Santa along Sheep Creek. Horses will be loaned to the youth and Tribal Elders will be present along the way to share their knowledge of plants, animals, and Tribal culture & history. In addition, planning is underway to conduct youth activities in archery, traditional foods, bead craft, and pow wow regalia & dance.

For More Information

Valdasue Steele
Extension Educator
University of Idaho
Benewah County Cooperative Extension System
701 College Ave.
St. Maries, ID 83861
Phone: 208-245-2422
Fax: 208-245-0604
E-mail: vsteele@uidaho.edu

Jannette Taylor
Department of Education
Coeur D'Alene Tribe
P.O. Box 238
DeSmet, ID 83851
Phone: 208-686-5310

Wade McGee
Youth Activities Director
Coeur D'Alene Tribe
P.O. Box 154
Plummer, ID 83851
Phone: 208-686-5139