

# Summer school in the mountains

## Kulshan kids head outdoors

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Features writer

Water bugs and campfires in the wilderness became a real life experience for 14 Kulshan Creek neighborhood kids from Mount Vernon on the hottest days so far this summer.

The children, ages 8-14, and eight wilderness instructors spent two days and a night, July 7-8, learning about nature during the Kulshan Creek Neighborhood Kids Program Summer Mountain School through the North Cascades Environmental Learning Center at Diablo Lake, east of Sedro-Woolley.

The Kulshan program began in 2007 in partnership with North Cascades Institute, National Forest Service, Mount Vernon Police Department and National Park Service.

U.S. Forest Service program coordinator Lee Whitford of Port Townsend said the mostly Latino youth in this group all struggle with lifestyle complications at home such as gangs, parents with mental illness or drug addictions, parental abuse and crowded housing (in some cases several families living in a two-bedroom apartment).

"They are great kids, challenging at times, but those of us who have been working with the neighborhood for three years now adore them," she said.

For two jam-packed days, the kids learned skull identification, observation skills and about water bugs and wilderness animals. They even experimented



Photos by Rick Allen / U.S. Forest Service

**Brianna Cardenas, 10, of Mount Vernon** talks with U.S. Forest Service biologist Don Gay during the Kulshan Creek Neighborhood Kids Summer Mountain School program on July 8 at the North Cascades Environmental Learning Center in North Cascades National Park.



**Luis Sanchez, 10, of Mount Vernon** looks at moss through a microscope.

with the way sound travels during an evening excursion to the Diablo Dam. "... there was a lot of hooting and hollering as we discovered the echo effect," Whitford said.

Gathered around a campfire at the Lily Shelter, she said they sang silly songs, listened to stories, played games and one guide played the guitar.

One youngster hopped out of bed before 6 a.m. the next morning and couldn't be coaxed back to bed, Whitford said. So, after a short six hours of sleep, everyone was soon ready to head out in the big canoe.

"The lake was like glass" while the kids learned the basics of canoeing, she said. "While one group

canoeed, the other group set off for a silent hike, reflection time and poetry writing."

*Nature  
nice fun  
amazing exciting funny  
tree free bird lake  
earth*

wrote a student named Brianna.

Whitford said the kids struggled with the concept of making an unselfish wish, but eventually came up with one to write down in a group exercise before it was time to head home.

Ice cream at Cascadian Farm near Rockport made the homeward trip a special occasion, she said.

"We don't just provide unstructured and structured time in nature," Whitford said about the school. "We provide one-on-one adult interactions, a safe environment and, in several cases, something as basic as three meals a day for this time."