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Environmental Writing

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Testimony Of Taylor

I almost didn't apply for Semester in the Wild. When I came to the University of Idaho, the "nation's wildest classroom" had been one of the topmost reasons for me coming. As I completed my first semester of university, my perspective towards the program had slightly shifted. I blame it on my Z personality, who had the audacity to state, "Some of those credits won't go to your major. You won't be able to work part time out there. No watching college football all Saturday." My eagerness in buying a lease for my sophomore year of college in December (peer pressure is a wonderful thing) also put a damper on things. It wasn't until February when I got this gut instinct to look at the details of this ambitious program again. The Frank Church— River of No Return Wilderness. The largest interconnected wilderness in the contiguous United States was at my fingertips and I was just going to let it slip away? The purpose of life is to have experiences that help you grow and mature as a person, to become someone better. What better experience is there than living in the middle of nowhere for a semester? I quickly sent Meg and Pete an email asking if they were still taking applications. Luckily, they were.

"I'll take some gum", I told the fearless, badass, backcountry pilot that was taking my life into his hands. A rickety, thrilling flight— that reminded me of the old wooden roller coast at Lagoon Amusement Park— took me to Taylor Wilderness Research Station: my home for the next three months. Sun reflected off the pristine creek that played a simple yet elegant song for

the ears that walked by; a song that was repetitive but never got old. Mountains shot up on all sides of me, glazed by the intense Idaho rays and drained of moisture from the dry-as-bone air. Aromas that were rare in the front country pillaged my nose with late summer greetings. A group of strangers that would soon turn into a family hugged and greeted me as I took my first few steps off the plane. It seemed that my gut instinct to apply for the program might just pay off after all.

Wind howled across the rigged ridge that the 2019 Semester in the Wild undergraduates had just ascended. Looking below, I could see the snow ridden lodgepole pines sway back and forth in tune with the wind, understanding the power of letting go as depicted in the *Legacy of Luna* by Julia Butterfly Hill. It was day three of our ten-day ecology backpack trip, and the *Game of Thrones* quote “Winter is coming” was the thought that drifted through my head. Smiles and good vibes from my wild family surrounded me, and my feet that were drenched from marching through October snow seemed to warm up a little bit. The wind, snow, and low seasonal temperatures were no match for my cotton T-shirt, adrenaline pumping through my arteries, and the *Lord of Rings* soundtrack playing in my head that can empower any human being. Continued trudging along the snow shielded ridge allowed us to reach a reasonable campsite at the elevation of 8300 feet. The chattering of teeth and shivering of bones covered by Patagonia sweaters resulted in the immediate building of a fire— of course done with the Ed Krumpe test where fire wood must break cleanly with arm strength in order to provide a clean burn. Flurries of white danced down the sky, attacking the fire that warmed the skins of the group huddled around it. Hundreds of years ago, Native Americans belonging to the Dukudeka people, now part of Shosone-Bannock Tribe (Ed Galindo, I still remember there are six tribes in modern Idaho), had done the same thing in the name of survival. I felt a slight connection to

them that evening; Papoose Peak rose to our east and the area was one rich with history and culture. Night came and I retreated to my tent, mentally preparing for the cold night.

A fresh foot of snow greeted the group in the morning. Injuries, cold temperatures, and difficult trail trudging generated the decision to descend to Cabin Creek, 4000 feet below. Meg's teachings on leadership made us realize that our wilderness family should come to consensus rather than a vote, and the group realized that this would be the best course of action under the circumstances. The descent was remarkable. Miles upon miles of wilderness laid before me in every direction; a vast intermixing ecosystem that held 300-year-old Douglas Firs as well as day old maggots. One of the readings that Adam Sowards assigned came to mind from *American Wilderness* when this broad spectrum of wilderness presented itself. Aldo Leopold states, "By wilderness, I mean a continuous stretch of country preserved in its natural state... big enough to absorb a two-weeks pack trip and kept devoid of roads, artificial trails, cottages, and other works of man." Wilderness stands as a place where all people can follow their gut instincts and take a walk on the wild side. That urge to say "screw it" and follow a primitive lifestyle for some time. My gut reaction to go to a place bigger than myself—to learn, grow, and develop— was risky, dicey, even dumb. Yet wilderness has that effect on the hearts of man.

As for my time at Taylor, I learned more about myself from the people around me and our experiences together. Chris and I had infamous chess battles (Dalton leads 5-3). Emily taught me to play cribbage and shuffle. I was with Risa when we went to the Middle Fork and saw Patchy the Black Bear. Kyle and I can bullshit about nothing for hours. Carmella will run with me in the dark. Leah taught me cooking wasn't so bad. Rachel made me paranoid about being scared at any moment. Maddie told me some hilarious stories. Amber is the type of friend that will do anything for you. Connor boosts morals with his good mood. And Orla formed the

extraordinary Team R.O.D. on the five-day trip. Of course, every professor and the Gag family impacted me too. These people will forever be in my memory and I consider them a second family. Thank you Taylor, you're one of a kind.