

Alaska Native students embark on arctic field trip

by The Associated Press

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska - They're willing to forgo showers for days and battle the voracious mosquitoes of Alaska's Arctic, for the sake of science.

This tiny group of Alaska Native honors students embarked Sunday on a camping field trip to the Institute of Arctic Biology's Toolik field station in northern Alaska. The complex, which draws scientists from all over the world, is an eight-hour drive from Fairbanks, much of it on the Dalton Highway, a largely gravel road stretching to Deadhorse, just south of the Prudhoe Bay oil field.

"I'm really excited. I haven't been camping yet this summer," said Marissa Mills, a 17-year-old Inupiat Eskimo who loves science and criminal justice, and thinks a perfect marriage of the two would be to become an Alaska wildlife trooper.

Mills, who has been living in Palmer but might return to her birthplace in Kotzebue for her senior year, four other high school students and another who just graduated are participating in the five-day field trip through the Rural Alaska Honors Institute, a six-week summer college preparatory program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. They plan to return to Fairbanks on Thursday.

The students will camp out in tents a ways from the station. They will assist in various projects, including catching bugs for climate warming research, according to UAF research assistant Kimberley Maher. She coordinated the trip and is accompanying the students on the field trip, which is partially being funded by the National Science Foundation.

The students will work closely with scientists and get some real hands-on field experience, Maher said. Projects on their itinerary include research on the effects of earlier snow melt on insects, plants and migratory songbirds; and thermokarsts, formed when tundra that collapses over thawing permafrost.

"It'll expose them to all different types of research going on there," Maher said.

Established in 1983, the rural honors program is open to high-achieving high school juniors and seniors with cumulative grade point averages of 3.0. It was created at the request of the Alaska Federation of Natives, but is open to qualifying non-native rural students as well.

Field trips have been conducted before, but this is the first time students have made the trek to the Toolik field station, said the Denise Wartes, program manager of the honors institute. The trip comes right after the students graduated from the honors course.

"It's such a wonderful opportunity," Wartes said. "We're just delighted."

After returning, the students will write "reflection" papers about the excursion.

Seventeen-year-old Megan Russell expects the trip to be a rich experience, especially spent with fellow students she has come to see as family. The Toolik station is also the farthest north she's ever been - about a thousand miles from her home at Sand Point near the tip of the Alaska Peninsula.

Russell, an Aleut, wants to exercise her love of science either in a teaching career or becoming a doctor. She envisions herself working in one of Alaska's larger cities rather than Sand Point,

home to about 975 people.

"I'd like to go somewhere else," she said. "But I would like to go back to my community and show people how far you can go, that there's a world out there."

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