

# KNOWLEDGE BASE

## Taking Education to Where Students Live



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In 1993 I joined the faculty of the brand-new University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) to help build its programs in natural resources management. One of my first duties was to meet with leaders of

the Nisga'a First Nation in the remote Nass Valley of northwestern British Columbia. They had invited a small delegation of UNBC educators to visit a special site to discuss an idea. Getting there required multiple hours of slow, bumpy driving along dirt tracks in rugged coastal mountains. Finally we emerged at Kitsault, at the head of a long fjord called Alice Arm. There we found a small town complete with a school, swimming pool, shopping center, and apartment buildings. The eerie thing was the total absence of humans, except for a small maintenance crew. This was my closest brush ever with the "Twilight Zone!" It turned out the site had been developed for a mine which quickly shut down due to a downturn in global markets.

The Nisga'a have an extraordinary commitment to higher education for their youth, regarding it as key to the community's future success. They saw UNBC, the province's first university outside of Vancouver and Victoria, as the solution to their higher-education needs. Some families were fine

with sending their young people to the "big city" of Prince George to complete degree programs. But for others, concerns ranged from adversity the students might face (homesickness, culture shock, exposure to alcohol and drugs, etc.) to the hardships on grandparents, aunts, and others who depended on young family members for game and fish harvests, firewood gathering, driving to medical appointments, and many other services. Their idea was this: couldn't UNBC use the facilities at Kitsault to offer classes so that residents could earn their degrees without leaving the Nass Valley?

Opening a second, highly-remote campus was impossible. However, the notion of taking education to where students live was starting to materialize by means of fiber-optic linkages to remote communities. At first, "distance delivery" meant that students could participate in regular university classes through phone and Internet connections. Next came classes specially designed for online delivery, and eventually entire degree programs. Today, the Nisga'a and others can complete a bachelor of arts degree without leaving the Nass Valley!

What about disciplines such as wildlife that have significant laboratory and field components? The evolution has been similar, starting with individual, non-lab courses offered online by the universities. Next came professional graduate degrees in natural resource fields, designed to strengthen the policy and administrative credentials of mid-career people. Next came "hybrid" undergraduate programs, with part of the

coursework offered online and the rest, including lab and field components, completed on campus.

New ground was broken by Oregon State University recently with the offering of a Bachelor of Science degree program in fisheries and wildlife science. Immediately I was skeptical on two accounts. What about the laboratory component, so essential to learning biology? The program solved this by requiring students to complete a year of biology, with labs, at a college or university in the area where they live. Fair enough. But what about the hands-on learning that occurs in techniques classes and field exercises? The solution is that two internships must be completed prior to graduation. Internships put students to work with an agency, non-government organization, business, or other natural resource-related employer where they obtain "practical knowledge, skills, experience, and connections," either as paid or volunteer staff.

Many colleagues remain doubtful that a wildlife graduate who has never stepped foot on campus can be as well prepared for entering the profession as those who obtain a more conventional education. Others observe that online learning works perfectly well for the generation that grew up with the Internet, and that real-world learning gained through internships likely beats university classes all to heck.

Only time will tell, as the new generation makes its mark in the wildlife profession. I'll keep tabs via the Internet from the remote piece of British Columbia where I live. ■

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**Remote areas such as the Nass Valley in British Columbia have benefited from the expanding online education options.**