

MILK RIVER PROJECT



Winding through the arid mountain landscape of the Northern Great Plains, Montana's Milk River supports one of the nation's richest biological areas that attracted Native American cultures and cuts through dinosaur-rich fossil deposits. The State of Montana purchased 4500 acres of this region in 2013 creating the Milk River Wildlife Management Area, but the archeological and paleontological resources were retained by the land owners. Since 2006, the University of Notre Dame has conducted a summer undergraduate field program in the area that focuses on grassland ecology, Native American environmental attitudes and dinosaur ecology. This program is open to students from any college, especially Native American students. *We seek to protect the indigenous cultural sites dating back 10,000 years and the dinosaur fossil-beds by acquiring archeological/paleontological rights from the original land owners, and create an endowment so the education program at this unique site can expand.*

The site is filled with reminders of our continent's first indigenous inhabitants, including ancient burial grounds, tepee rings, ceremonial places, plant gathering locations and "buffalo jumps" where bison were hunted by driving them over the cliffs. A walk along the bluffs overlooking the Milk River reveals fossil dinosaur bones and marine-life. The area's pristine prairie and floodplain forest and their abundant wildlife surrounds you and reminds us of what Lewis and Clark saw when they first entered the region. This is a living museum for cultural and environmental studies to inspire students.

DESCRIPTION

Purpose:

attain archeological and paleontological rights to 4500 acres and endow an educational/research program using the area.

Partners:

University of Notre Dame,
State of Montana,
Tribes of Montana

Location:

Montana, Milk River on
Canadian border north of
Havre

Project:

\$5 million
Endowment and rights to be
managed by University of
Notre Dame.

Working together, Notre Dame, the State of Montana and Native American tribes have ensured protection of the land and its plants and animals. But we need to go further. In addition, we now need to protect the rich archeological and paleontological resources from commercial exploitation by attaining these rights, so their cultural and scientific value is protected for all to benefit. Furthermore, we need to ensure that the rich biological and cultural resources inspire future generations through education programs.

There is no better way to impress people with how environments can change and affect animals and plants than to observe how life changed during the Age of Dinosaurs. There is no better way to appreciate different cultures than to contemplate how they adapted to live in different environments. There is no better way to understand how we rely upon the living world, how we can change it and how beautiful it is than by experiencing it firsthand. This is our heritage that defines us as a nation and helps to shape our future. The Notre Dame 10-week summer program in the area has been successfully doing this for a decade, and is ripe for expansion.



The summer program brings together Native and non-Native American undergraduates to better appreciate environmental biology and natural resource management, as well as each other's cultures. All of the Native American students who have participated in this program have completed their undergraduate degrees (nationally less than 20% graduate) with more than 80% going to graduate school in environmental fields. The program has been highly successful with Native and non-Native students going to work for tribal natural resource agencies, and has been praised and endorsed by tribal organizations.

PARTNERS

University of Notre Dame: through its Environmental Research Center (UNDERC - <http://underc.nd.edu/>) has supported and worked to protect the Milk River lands since 2002 and has conducted a summer education/research program bringing together Native American and non-Native undergraduates since 2006. These activities have been in conjunction with Native American tribes and the State of Montana.

State of Montana: purchased the Milk River area in 2013 as a wildlife management area, but could not afford to acquire rights to archeological and paleontological resources, which are legally treated the same as mineral rights.

Tribes of Montana: have been involved in protecting the Milk River area because many of the tribes originally dwelled in this area, especially to hunt buffalo. Their ultimate goal is to reintroduce buffalo and partner with Notre Dame in creating a cultural education center to educate the public to their environmental ethic and concern for the land.