



LEARNING
THROUGH
THE LENS

BY SALLY NASER

Photo by NGPC student Haley Schultz



by NGPC staff Ross Goldberg



by NGPC staff Evan Wilder

“Generally, I do not notice the connections between nature and me, [but] when I have a camera in my hand, the connection is as clear as day.”

—NGPC student

photo by NGPC student Greg Strosnider



This past August, 16 Clarke County, Virginia high school students went on an Appalachian Trail photo assignment with National Geographic Photo Camp (NGPC). Traveling to 10 different locations per year, NGPC provides a series of community based photography workshops to teens across the United States and abroad. In line with National Geographic’s overall mission to “inspire people to care about the planet,” the ultimate goal of NGPC is to use photography to provide young people with a dynamic learning opportunity: to explore their community and the world around them through the camera’s lens. Working in partnership with Vision Workshops, Inc. of Annapolis, Maryland, both organizations share the common goal of challenging young people to share their vision through the publication and exhibition of their photographs.

In the spirit of the cooperative partnerships that make the A.T. management system work, this particular Photo Camp would not have been possible without excellent coordination between National Geographic Photo Camp’s program director Lindsay G. McCullough, Vision Workshops’ executive director Kirsten Elstner, Appalachian Trail Conservancy’s (ATC) information services manager Laurie Potteiger, and the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (PATC), who provided an excellent staging area for the camp at the Bears Den Trail Center, a large,

cozy A.T. hostel, owned by ATC and maintained by PATC. “It was a privilege to see everyone so generously and eagerly sharing their vision, talents, and passion with a group of amazing kids. I don’t know who was more inspiring the [staff] in their different roles, or the kids, with their incredible capacity to learn and absorb, and see seemingly ordinary things in extraordinary ways,” said ATC’s Potteiger, “both the words and pictures created by the kids conveyed how deeply they had been touched and transformed by their experience. Speaking for myself, I think some of us ‘grown-ups’ were too.”

Photographic expertise was provided by Amy Toensing, along with her fiancé Matt Moyer. Both are National Geographic contributing photographers. Toensing stepped forward to lead this particular Photo Camp due in large part to her close personal connection with the A.T. She grew up in the Trail town of Hanover, New Hampshire, worked at the Pinkham Notch Visitors Center in the White Mountains during high school, and set off on an A.T. thru-hike in the spring of 1988, completing 1,850 miles with only the state of Maine left to finish the hike. “I really think [the students] were able to come out here and absorb all the sounds and smells ... the way the Trail is, and really tune into people,” said Toensing.

Additional NGPC staff included Evan Wilder, digital imaging and film reviewer for *National Geographic* magazine. Vol-



by NGPC staff Evan Wilder

unteer teaching assistants included *National Geographic's* Edward Samuel and Ross Goldberg, along with Will Hirzy, a photojournalism student at the University of Missouri, Alexandra Garcia, a photojournalist for the *Washington Post*, and ATC boundary manager Sally Naser.

In working with the 2008–2009 NGPC themes of the environment, conservation, and youth perspectives on the natural world, the A.T., its corridor, and the surrounding northern Virginia area made an excellent subject for the students to explore through the camera's lens. More than 10,000 digital images were captured during the four-day camp that ran from August 11–14 documenting not only the natural beauty of the Trail, but also the people that enjoy hiking it, and those who work to conserve this vital resource.

"I was extremely impressed with these students' creative and enthusiastic approach to all of our activities and shooting assignments. This landscape can be very difficult to photograph even for the experienced photographer, but these students were always positive and daring, and that translated through in their images," said NGPC's McCullough. Students were instructed and encouraged by the NGPC staff "to get on their knees, get dirty, and climb rocks and trees," as they explored the Trail with their cameras.

The hardest part for all involved was the final day of the camp when staff and students presented a digital slideshow of the best work produced, including behind-the-scenes images. "Looking

at the Trail through the viewfinder [was] a window into a new perspective," said participating student LeAnn Albert. The A.T. Photo Camp was an amazing experience for students, NGPC staff, PATC volunteers, ATC, and everyone from the A.T. community who passed by that week at Bears Den Trail Center.

National Geographic Photo Camp, headquartered in Washington, D.C., will be featured in an exhibition in November as part of FotoWeek D.C. Images from Photo Camp 2008 will showcase youths' perspectives on issues of conservation, the environment, and connecting to the landscape. As a domestic and international program, National Geographic Photo Camp's exhibit will include work from Bronx, New York; Santa Monica, California; the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland; Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota; the Appalachian Trail in Virginia; Taos, New Mexico; Vinalhaven and North Haven Islands, Maine; and Costa Rica.

For more information and to view images taken by these and other students and instructors visit:

www.nationalgeographic.com/photocamp

www.visionworkshops.org

www.amytoensing.com



by NGPC student Andya Tellez



by NGPC student Avery Harden



by NGPC student Sarah Keplinger

"It really opens your eyes to what's out there and what is going on around us; [and] it lets us show the world who we really are through the stories that our pictures tell."

—NGPC student