

IJNR's Energy Country Institute: Supporting 'Values of Good Journalism'

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Shiprock, sans the brown haze that often envelopes it.

Shiprock rises like a massive cathedral 1,800 feet above Navaho country in New Mexico. The best photographs capture the rock formation in reddish hues, set against a pristine blue sky. But the first time I saw Shiprock, which figures prominently in Navaho religion and mythology, it was mostly lost in a brown haze. A layer of muck shrouded the expansive Four Corners area of the American Southwest. It was the first day of a week-long fellowship with the Institutes for Journalism & Natural Resources, and about five of us were packed into a chartered Cessna flying 2,000 feet above a sweeping landscape dotted with natural gas wells and two giant coal-fired power plants.

In addition to the 1,800-megawatt San Juan Generating Station and the 2,040-megawatt Four Corners Power Plant, a third coal-fired plant now is proposed for this region: Desert Rock. The Environmental Protection Agency is re-examining a 2008 decision to approve an air permit for the controversial project, which, not surprisingly, is opposed by environmental groups.



San Juan Generating Station, an 1,800 megawatt coal-fired power plant in the Four Corners area.

Electricity generated in the Four Corners area serves much of New Mexico, but Arizona and California are also big customers. Here on ancestral Navaho land, out of sight and out of mind for millions of electricity consumers from New Mexico to California, polluted air and scarred land offer a stark testament to America's voracious appetite for cheap electricity.

At the same time, the Navahos are divided over whether to push for Desert Rock and reap new financial benefits or stop further coal development, which many see as a blight and health risk.

The flight above northwestern New Mexico was one of many revelations during IJNR's Fall 2009 Energy Country Institute, one of several learning expedition fellowships for journalists that the organization has offered around the country since 1995. IJNR was founded by a former *Wall Street Journal* environment editor, Frank Allen, to give journalists experiences that immerse them in the environmental topics they cover.

IJNR's central program is the Learning Expedition, a stimulating and intense in-the-field experience that lasts from one to two weeks. Lectures, presentations, and back-and-forth discussions are part of the package. But fellows also find themselves working on cattle ranches, kayaking down rivers and - in the case of last November's Energy Country Institute in New Mexico - flying in small aircraft over coal plants and wind farms, touring national energy labs, and visiting an insular Native American pueblo that is partnering with the federal government to build a new solar energy plant.

Allen says IJNR's Learning Expeditions offer journalists experiences that go beyond the largely indoor lecture-filled crash courses that characterize many journalism fellowships. Sort of A 'Field Trip' ... and 'A Deeper Level of Appreciation'

"In junior high we used to call it the field trip, where you actually go have an adventure and see places and smell them and touch them and get your hands dirty and your feet wet," Allen said in a recent telephone interview.



Wind turbines on a mesa on the cattle ranchers who lease part of their grazing land in Pastura, N.M.

“You milk the cows, put bait in the lobster trap, and watch guys cut down trees that are 200 years old,” he said. “You begin to see for yourself what it means to take raw materials out of the forests and landscapes, and water, and turn them into products that people consume.”

Fellows share meals with people who extract natural resources from the environment to make a living, and they hike with others who make the rules and the policies that govern use of the environment.

That kind of immersive experience “takes you to a deeper level of appreciation of the environment, and how we use it and abuse it,” Allen said.

IJNR has offered expedition fellowships around the country that touch upon a variety of environmental issues. But the Energy Country Institute, introduced in 2005 and offered every year since, was the first to focus sharply on a single theme.

For the fall fellowship, a Holiday Inn Express was our base camp in Albuquerque. An IJNR staff of four - Allen, IJNR’s president; Peter Annin, IJNR’s associate director and a former national reporter for Newsweek; Maggie Allen, logistics chief and Frank’s wife; and Meg Nelson, IJNR’s development director - loaded us onto a bus at the crack of dawn each day for 12-14 hours of tours, talks, and first-hand views of New Mexico’s energy landscape.

The fellowship class - there were 16 of us - was a broad mix of journalists, some with a few years in the business and others with decades behind them. Along with others, the class included Tyler Hamilton, an energy reporter and blogger from the *Toronto Star*; Judy Pasternak, a former national correspondent from the *LA Times*; public radio journalists Anna Panoka from Denver

and Lauren Sommer from San Francisco; and AP reporters Paul Foy from Salt Lake City and Susan Montoya Bryan from Albuquerque.

There was a great mix of newspaper reporters and freelancers working in print and online and in graphic arts and film.

Cynthia Graber, a freelance writer and radio producer from Somerville, Mass., who has written about energy issues in Iceland, Spain and elsewhere, said the timing was right for a fellowship with IJNR.

“It’s an exciting time to be talking about energy issues and renewable energy, when you have a new administration, and an administration that is paying very close attention to these issues,” Graber said in a recent telephone interview. “So I thought it was a perfect time to do something like this.”

Pasternak, who is in the final stages of writing a book about the grim legacy of uranium mining on Navaho lands, said in an e-mail interview that the IJNR fellowship offered a great opportunity to expand her horizons and broaden her roster of sources.

“I had written a lot about coal-fired power plants and nuclear reactors and drilling and mining ... but I knew very little about solar and wind (power), and here was a crash course coming right up,” she said.

Autumn Spanne, a New York City-based editor of Represent, a national magazine about foster care, said she joined the Energy Country Institute to jump-start her return to environmental journalism. While writing a series about climate change at a newspaper a few years ago, Spanne said she quickly learned how challenging it can be to report on the issue.

“The more research I did on that series, the more I realized that I needed to develop more expertise about energy,” Spanne said in an e-mail interview. “So the chance to spend a week looking intensively at the economics and politics around renewable energy development seemed a great opportunity.”

The fellowship’s first day was spent flying with an outfit called EcoFlight over the San Juan Generating Station and the greater Four Corners area; speaking with lawyer-activists working on behalf of Navahos whose land has been polluted by the fossil fuel industry; and then meeting with executives from PNM, New Mexico’s largest electricity provider and operator of the San Juan generating station.

Day Two was spent touring Sandia National Laboratories, where we were briefed on solar power, the challenges of developing batteries that can store larger amounts of electricity, research into closed-cycle systems; and prospects for converting carbon dioxide into petrol.

On Wednesday the fellowship focused on wind power, with an air tour of the Aragonne Mesa Wind Power Farm near Santa Rosa at the eastern end of the state. Fellows also visited a rancher who has found new wealth by leasing land to a wind power company that pays him \$90,000 minimum per year to operate 18 wind turbines on his mesa above his home.

Thursday offered a wonderful cultural excursion to the Jemez Pueblo not far from Los Alamos, where native people grounded firmly in tradition are embracing the latest solar energy technology to modernize their ancestral lands.

Friday was spent visiting Santa Fe, where we met with a homeowner who spoke of the challenges and rewards of retrofitting his home to make it more energy efficient. We then met with local and state officials who spoke about how government regulations and policies can be better marshaled to promote renewable energy.

The final day began with a briefing from climate change scientists who have tracked environmental changes in the Southwest as average global temperatures continue to rise. Breakfast briefings were followed by a drive to the top of Sandia Mountain, where a hike at the summit was canceled after a snowstorm made driving treacherous. A bit of improvisation took us to lower elevations and a forest being nursed back to health by ecologists.

As we stood in a circle near a 300-year-old Ponderosa Pine, listening to scientists talk about their efforts and the large-scale consequences of warming on forests like this one, a light snow began to fall.

“We approached the topic from so many angles - economic, political, social, scientific - and that’s going to provide important context to stories I pursue in the coming months,” Spanne said of the fellowship.

“I appreciated flying over coal-fired power plants and natural gas wells to see the impact on the land and the people who live there, then hearing directly from residents alongside lawyers and industry officials. Each day seemed carefully designed as a good story should be: juxtaposing different perspectives, peeling back the various layers.”

Nurturing ‘the Values of Good Journalism’

Putting together fellowship programs like this isn’t cheap. For a class of 16 fellows for an eight-to nine-day program, the total costs run \$100,000-\$110,000, Allen said.

That covers the cost of scouting a trip by IJNR staff members, making contacts and scheduling briefings, visits and excursions on airplanes, vessels, on horseback and by foot, and support for IJNR staff members for their time - in addition to the expense of accommodations, food, and transportation for everyone.

The recession has hurt IJNR’s ability to raise money, although the staff is planting seeds all the time, Allen said. Support in the past has come from environmental groups like Defenders of Wildlife and The Wilderness Society, and also from industry interests such as the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association.

IJNR’s biggest supporters, however, have traditionally been private foundations, including The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, and the Challenge Fund for Journalism and others.

It would be impossible to describe the full breadth of the fellowship in a single article, but the collective experience of all six days likely will leave a lasting impression, professionally and personally, on the journalism participants.

“We’ve tried to make each IJNR institute the kind of adventure ... that will be remembered for a long time by each journalist who goes on one,” Allen said.

“They’ll go back with something extra living inside them that will help inspire and inform the work they do. And I think the work they do is very hard, and they need and deserve this kind of support and encouragement.”

The fellowship also is designed to spark lasting friendships and professional connections that last long after the program comes to an end.

At a time when American journalism has been pummeled by financial hardships and an exodus of talent, programs like IJNR’s expedition fellowships offer journalists a lifeline.

“We want to nurture a core of people who really care deeply about the values of good journalism, and we want them to survive and stay in the business,” Allen said.

Elizabeth Souder, the energy reporter for the Dallas Morning News, said the fellowship gave her “fresh ideas, new friends, and new tools for organizing my stories.”

“To be honest, much of the energy information was a refresher for me, since I have the luxury of covering the beat exclusively. But it was very good to hear the questions and concerns of other reporters from around the country,” Souder said.

For Spanne, the fellowship offered an energizing break.

“Most of us were far enough removed from our regular routines that we could have substantive conversations without the pressure of deadlines, and collaborate with one another in terms of discussing and asking questions about what we had learned each day, and how we might bring new ideas back to our reporting,” she said.

Some fellows have written stories using material they gathered on the visit to New Mexico. Two examples are here by Tyler Hamilton at The Toronto Star; and here by Susan Montoya Bryan of the Associated Press.

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