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Student project informs River Falls dam removal project

Hands-on research provides valuable data to local decision makers

Written by Heidi Jeter, Freshwater Collaborative of Wisconsin

When the City of River Falls needed qualified people to provide ecological monitoring for the removal of the Junction Falls and Powell Falls Dams, University of Wisconsin-River Falls faculty and staff stepped in to fulfill the community need.

The group created the Data Analysis and Monitoring Crew, a two-week summer experience where undergraduates are trained by river restoration professionals to monitor the impacts of dam removal on the Kinnickinnic River. Their data contributes to the 10-year Kinnickinnic River Monitoring Plan written in 2021 by the Kiap-TU-Wish Chapter of Trout Unlimited and Inter-Fluve.

The DAM Crew, as it’s affectionately known, completed its fourth year of monitoring in August. This year’s crew included seven students from UW-River Falls and one from UW-Eau Claire.

“DAM Crew participants learn hands-on, workforce-ready skills in stream geomorphological and ecological monitoring from practicing professionals while filling a critical knowledge need for the regional community,” said Jill Coleman Wasik, a plant and earth science professor at UW-River Falls and creator of the DAM Crew.

Students worked closely with community partners, including the Kinni Corridor Collaborative, Trout Unlimited, Kinnickinnic River Land Trust and the City of River Falls. They were trained by a geomorphologist from Inter-Fluve to collect data that will be used to predict and monitor the impacts that dam removal will have on the river.

In addition to the field monitoring experience, the students gained knowledge of data management and assessment in the practice of dam removal and river restoration. They also learned the importance of advocacy and community involvement to create a beneficial ecological outcome.

"Being part of the DAM crew gave me the opportunity to dive headfirst into real-world research and water monitoring, allowing me to contribute my passion for science to a meaningful community project," said Cass Hoffmann, an environmental science major and senior from Apple Valley, Minn.

Students are recruited each spring from the 13 Universities of Wisconsin institutions. In addition to contributing to the city plan, the students present their findings at regional and/or national conferences.

According to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, there are 3,900 dams in Wisconsin, many of which are aging and may need removal. Coleman Wasik notes that students participating in the DAM Crew can help fill the state’s growing need for skilled professionals who can assist communities in dam removal and river restoration projects.

The DAM Crew is a cooperative effort involving UW-River Falls, the Kiap-TU-Wish Chapter of Trout Unlimited, the Kinni Corridor Collaborative and Inter-Fluve. It is funded by the Freshwater Collaborative of Wisconsin.

“Kiap-TU-Wish has had the pleasure of engaging with DAM Crew students and faculty to assist with this incredible learning process for all involved,” said Kent Johnson of the Kiap-TU-Wish Chapter of Trout Unlimited. “The monitoring plan is largely a volunteer-driven initiative, and the UW-River Falls DAM Crew has been a critical partner for implementing the pre-restoration monitoring work during the past four summers.”

In July, the Freshwater Collaborative committed to funding six additional years of the DAM Crew, which will help see the 10-year monitoring plan to completion.