Outdoorsy new course spurs deeper connections to places, people, and the natural world

A wild blend of experiential learning, history, ecology, philosophy, and fresh-air fun, *Sense of Place* was two years in the planning. In September, its seven inaugural students—armed with field notebooks, sneakers, and water bottles—set out to discover what creates “a sense of place” and the many attributes that might make a place worth protecting.

Focusing first on the robust history of their 500-acre home away from home, the class later explored local forests, rivers, and ponds as well as human influences and environmental issues. They covered a lot of ground, figuratively and literally, in their 10 hours together each week, meeting with 17 on- and off-campus experts and often walking six or seven miles in a single afternoon.

Antonella Menta Fernandez ’15 chose the course because it sounded like “a door to unexpected learning.” She was not disappointed. “It was interdisciplinary in a way I never thought was possible,” she says.

*Sense of Place* was crafted by co-instructors Christine Marshall-Walker, who also teaches biology, and Mark Cutler, who also teaches Spanish and has led *Outdoor Pursuits*, formerly *Search & Rescue*, since 2004 (see page 42).

“We wanted our students to ‘own’ their journey through a wide variety of disciplines, terrain, and primary sources—and for their hard work to be fueled by personal, relevant appreciations of this place,” says Marshall-Walker.

“A sense of place leads ultimately to a responsibility of place,” says Cutler. “These students are future stewards of land, buildings, and history in their home and other communities.”
Engaging the senses—Met at Bicentennial Elm, picked up Stott Trail, headed through Stanley Reservation and cemetery to Pomp’s. Beautiful walk. Joined by two Andover High students and teacher. At Sand Pit, discussed glaciers and geological structures. Looked for elusive Foster’s Island; found deer tracks and ladybugs. Trudged through significant mud. Discussed man-made dams and how human presence has affected Andover watershed.

Day trip to Cardigan—Bad start: I overslept. Was 30 minutes late and condemned to van’s middle front seat. Goal: to climb Cardigan Mountain in N.H. The drizzle could not deter us, but a torrential downpour and foreboding rumbles suggested retreat to AMC Lodge. When the sky cleared we stopped by the sustainable campsite (built by Sally Manikian ’00), featuring a latrine that self-composts!

Lessons in conservation—Along with two colleagues, John Kimball (left), grandson of the founder of Ward Reservation, met with students in the Log Cabin and later on the trails to talk about the 700-acre reservation’s ecology and history, forest forensics, and the challenges of land preservation. Chair of the Property Committee, Kimball lives in the original Ward home on the reservation. “One might associate a reservation with a piece of land that is kept wild and untouched by humans,” says Xin Wen ’15. “Thus, it might come as a surprise that behind successful land conservation are very deliberate plans and human effort.”

BIOPHILIA
an instinctive bond between human beings and other living systems; a longing to interact with the natural world
What inspires? Artist, naturalist, and former Elson Artist-in-Residence James Prosek (above) joined students to talk about the intersections of nature, art, and science. He gave each student 10 minutes to “create art” along the Cochran Sanctuary path using whatever nature provided; the results were surprisingly expressive and varied. At the Log Cabin, home base for Sense of Place, the group took time to do some drawings, paintings, and reflection.

A view from atop Holt Hill—About two miles from campus, Ward Reservation, once predominantly farmland, now has 10 miles of mostly wooded trails. Kimball and Adam Rollfs (center), caretaker of the Ward for the Trustees of Reservations, explained that they are working to clear trees and restore grassland habitats to encourage the return of early-20th-century bird and butterfly species. Students were fascinated by the Ward’s rare “quaking bog” ecosystem, which has no soil. The moist, springy ground, which surrounds a glacial pond, is made up entirely of vegetation.

A three-hour hike—On a cold, windy Saturday, Sense of Place students and faculty hiked to an AMC hut for an overnight in the White Mountains. Sally Manikian ’00 (right), assisted by Savord and Owen Corey ’15, led the group through an intense and, students said, highly relevant LNT (Leave No Trace) Trainer course, which teaches outdoor (and life) skill sets and ethics. On Sunday, the group awoke to 30-degree inside temps, sizzling bacon, and new-fallen snow.

An AMC backcountry resource conservation manager, Manikian also races dogsleds (see fall 2014 issue).