As part of my University of Wyoming Graduate Assistantship with EPSCoR, and the SMTC, I recently helped organize a ‘Wyoming Water in the Classroom’ workshop for teachers from the Wind River Reservation with a fellow graduate student, Tootsie Jablonski, Jordan Nobler from Teton Science Schools, and Wyoming EPSCoR’s Jennifer Wellman. Together we planned a day full of cultural conversations, water education content, and hands-on activities testing water quality for K-12 teachers.

Prior to the event, I felt a mixture of excitement and apprehension; this would be my first time teaching a workshop. I doubted my qualifications, since I expected the participants to have many more years of experience teaching than me. I was also unsure of what to expect on the reservation. Would tensions be running high due to the recent protests of the Dakota Access Pipeline? Was I bringing relevant and useful information to the participants? Fortunately, my anxiety was overridden by my excitement for positive collaboration. I couldn’t wait to see how our plans panned out.

The day began with an invocation from guest speaker Sergio Maldonado, who greeted everyone warmly and created a positive atmosphere. Next, tribal members Jason Balder and Fernando Roman shared their scientific expertise related to the Wind River and Reservation. I was captivated by the speakers’ words and felt privileged to learn firsthand about the history and struggles faced by the tribes.

Tootsie started by inviting participants to share their understanding of scientific and cultural impacts of water. “Base for survival” and “sustains life” were among the thoughts shared. She then modeled several classroom activities. After lunch I took the teachers outside to gain hands-on experience testing the water quality of the Little Wind River, and Jordan concluded by discussing inquiry in the classroom.

There were decades of teaching experience among the participants in the workshop. It was humbling to “teach” them about different ways they could incorporate water education in their classes, but the teachers were actively engaged in the activities throughout the day. They asked poignant and challenging questions, bettering my own understanding of the content and providing a more meaningful learning experience for everyone involved. I feel honored to have been invited to the Wind River Reservation to help with this important workshop. Water truly is life, and it is essential to teach our students about where it comes from, how to protect it, and how to share it with our surrounding neighbors.

Claire Ratcliffe