

The Humans Behind the Theory

Cob Staines, WRFI Instructor



These days, Cob Staines is a multi-course instructor for WRFI, having guided students through Conservation Across Boundaries, Restoration Ecology, Colorado Plateau and Cycle the Rockies. He is passionate about the place-based education WRFI courses provide, and the human connections he makes with the students, his co-instructors, and our community partners. Years ago, when he was a Physics student at the University of California Santa Barbara, he felt that connection was irreconcilably absent.

“When I studied Physics as an undergrad, it was a lot of theory. I made it out with a degree and some self-knowledge that I needed more relationship with what I was studying. In traditional academics, I see a lack of relationship with what we’re learning. We can say ‘this is what happens in theory’, but we don’t see the humanity behind it. Meeting with people on land is the opposite. You first meet them as a human and then you learn the theory. That engages me a lot more and allows me to hold different perspectives and see conflicts differently. It’s important to hold conflicting ideas in our minds without having to necessarily ‘pick a side’ or discredit a side. Seeing people and understanding their challenges allows us to appreciate complexity.”

Cob enjoys facilitating this opportunity for students to appreciate complexity as a WRFI instructor, but says he often feels like a student himself while out on course. Whether it’s learning from his students, improvising together while in the field, or meeting with a new community partner, he sees WRFI courses as “a dance of figuring out how all the pieces fit together”. WRFI courses teach theories, just as physics courses do, but it’s the humanity that makes all the difference.



Cob has been a WRFI instructor since 2021, teaching a variety of courses over the years. He has a BS in Physics from the University of California Santa Barbara and a Master’s Degree in Geography from the University of Saskatchewan. He now lives in the inter-Andean valley of the Gayabamba River (Quito, Ecuador) with his partner. When not on a WRFI course, he works and volunteers as an environmental research consultant for projects related to hydrology, geography, ecology, and land-human relations.