

MP students 'get in touch' with environment

Outdoor classroom provides hands-on experience

BY ELANA GLOWATZ
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Larissa Graham, outreach coordinator with the New York Sea Grant's Long Island Sound Study, held up a plastic baggie filled with water, the temporary home of a grass shrimp.

"You think — shrimp, not so exciting — but they're cool because you can see right through them. So you can actually see their stomachs and their brains —"

A chorus of "cool" erupted through the North Country Road Middle School seventh-graders.

"— and their intestines," Graham finished.

"That's awesome," a couple of boys called out.

On this sunny Thursday morning, the sands of Cedar Beach doubled as desks and chairs for the Miller Place students, who have reached the ecology unit in science. "Normally, right now I'd just be in class," said 12-year-old Richard Doyen. "There's a good break."

The kids spent the first part of their morning in the outdoor classroom testing the water from the Long Island Sound. They measured the temperature, pH, salinity and oxygen levels and conducted a turbidity test, which measures how clear the water is.

Kelsie Hanrahan, 11, said the salinity test is important because it determines "what animals are capable of living in there." And Marlee Painter, 12, said her dissolved oxygen test showed that the water did not have enough of the element in it.

Science teacher Helena Belanich said the students compile the data at school and

compare the information to both healthy ranges for the area and data from previous years. They will later use the measurements for their science fair projects.

This outdoor classroom program, called Open Space Stewardship, operates with the help of Brookhaven National Laboratory. Mel Morris, the lab's educational programs administrator, said BNL works with teachers and students to identify open spaces in their district and collect data to show changes over time.

'Kids just don't hold frogs and walk in the mud and do that kind of stuff anymore.'

— MEL MORRIS, BNL

Morris said it is important for the kids to "get outside and get in touch with their local environment," and that "kids just don't hold frogs and walk in the mud and do that kind of stuff anymore."

The Department of Environmental Conservation, Graham said, takes the data the students collect. Although it won't use the information for anything official, the students act as "eyes on the water to make sure everything is OK out there."

After the students collected the measurements on Thursday, Graham helped the seventh-graders catch some critters and learn more about them. Using a type of fishing net called a seine, the group brought up about eight different species — no creatures were harmed during the making of this program, they were released at the conclusion — out of the roughly 120 kinds of fish in the Long Island Sound. There wasn't a large variety for the kids because, Graham said, the students were sampling close to the shore and because the species present change

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Photos by Elana Glowatz

Top: Larissa Graham teaches the students about life in the Sound. Above: Nathaniel Smith, left, and Jake MacMonigle, right, observe a horseshoe crab.



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MP STUDENTS

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from spring to fall.

Stephen Farrell, 12, said he liked looking at a killifish the group caught because "it starts out real small and just gets gigantic." He added that he enjoyed going to Cedar Beach for class because "you get to get out of the classroom, instead of being in one room for 42 minutes."

Ashley Runyan, also 12, liked the pipefish because it was "fat at the head and

then got really skinny at the tail."

Collecting data, looking at the different creatures and getting involved turns the students into "environmental stewards," Graham said, and makes them care about the environment and its natural resources. She said although the kids are a little more focused on looking at the critters in the plastic baggies than they are on what she is saying, "the most important thing is to get them excited about that fish in that bag and make the connection that that fish came out of that harbor behind us."



Photos by Elana Glowatz

Top: A student examines a fish she caught. Above: The students see what the seine dragged in.

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