

Seabrook's Nature Classroom: Backyard field trip connects sixth-graders to salt marshes

It's a bit messy and chaotic, but incredibly fun and effective — when you bring kids outside of the classroom and into nature to learn, afterwards they're healthier, calmer, and they retain the lessons better. To that end, educators from New Hampshire's Seacoast are incorporating local ecology lessons and related games into their curricula, and by all accounts, it's been a smash hit with the students.

The sixth-grade class from Seabrook Middle School (SMS) spent a bright, warm day late last fall splashing around the tidal waters behind their school, holding bingo cards depicting marsh plants and soaking in their natural surroundings. The school district has been working hard in recent years to connect students to the outdoors whenever possible, but this was the first time the SMS sixth-graders made a direct connection to the local salt marsh, and it offered them a chance to deepen their sense of place within the rich natural history of the community.



Lauren deConstant, the Curriculum Coordinator for the Seabrook School District, and Lauren Hopkins, an SMS sixth-grade teacher, worked closely with Jay Diener and Rayann Dionne, both of whom are board members of the Seabrook-Hamptons Estuary Alliance (SHEA), to organize the salt marsh field day.

“These community partnerships allow our students the opportunity to see beyond the walls of the classroom and experience learning through the lens of experts in the field,” says deConstant. “They may even discover interests they may not have known they had before. These types of projects also help students develop curiosity about where they live and promote stewardship of the natural world.”

Before the students were set loose in the marsh, Sergio Bonilla, the Principal Wetland Ecologist for Mission Wetland and Ecological Services, LLC out of Portsmouth, N.H., gave a presentation on the types of vegetation that the students should look for; he then led the students on an enthusiastic scavenger hunt for salt marsh plant species to fill up their bingo cards.



“I think they [the students] were surprised at the wide variety of plants that live out in the salt marsh; I don’t think they expected so many different species,” Hopkins says.

In between students’ splashing and squealing, Bonilla’s message focused on the function and values that the estuary provides to the region, and the importance of having local, state and federal partners, as well as consultants from the private sector and volunteers, collaborating to manage these natural resources. After the sixth-graders spent time observing the different tidal zones and the fluctuating water elevations within the salt marsh, Dionne and Diener showed them the school’s newly installed Picture Post — a literal post in the ground that provides a spot where anyone can take 360-degree photos of the salt marsh and nearby wooded upland, and upload the photos to a database to track changes over time.



In addition to the immersive learning that took place that day, Bonilla stressed the importance of spending time in nature. “There are so many recreational opportunities for children and adults alike, from land and from the water,” he says. “In today’s society, the serenity and aesthetic perspective of the outside world can provide respite from some of the routine everyday trappings and stresses of the normal week. In turn, this can lead to maintaining a positive fresh mindset and, in some cases, improving mental health.

“I believe this event was meaningful to the students as a fun, educational respite from the everyday classroom and inspired them to spend more time outdoors and offline,” Bonilla adds. “It’s fascinating to see the positive impact that this workshop and groups like SHEA will have on students — and even adults — for generations to come.”

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