

Learning about the Environment

Four Winds Nature Program Helps Students Connect to the Outside World

Text and photography by ANDI DIEHN

“Pancakes!”

“Ice cream!”

“Hot dogs! And sometimes steak.”

The children in Tammy Poirier’s second grade class at Enfield (N.H.) Village School are not learning how to cook, nor are they planning their morning snack. They are calling out their ideas of what tastes best smothered in maple syrup. Pancakes are the favorite; ice cream takes a close second.

And now these 7 and 8 year olds can explain how their favorite sugary topping is made. They know how many gallons of sap it takes to make a gallon of syrup (40), they can identify a sugar maple, and they know that temperatures need to dip below freezing at night and rise to about 40 degrees during the day for the sap to run.

These children are well versed in maple syrup production thanks to two parent volunteers, Luci Wilson and Juanisa McDonald, who have just led the class in an hour and a half lesson. Wilson and McDonald volunteer with the Four Winds Nature Program, which teaches various science subjects — habitats, seeds, vernal pools, etc. — to 16,000 New England school children in about 100 schools across Vermont, New Hampshire and Massachusetts every month.

“In some schools, we’re the only science kids get before grade three,” remarks Rob Anderegg, associate director of the Four Winds Nature Institute.

THE SEEDS OF THE PROGRAM

The Four Winds Nature Program is offered by the Four Winds Nature Institute, a nonprofit group committed to environmental education. Formed in 2006, the Four Winds Nature Institute grew out of an educational program at the Vermont Institute of Natural Science (VINS) called Environmental Learning for the Future (ELF). “The ELF program had been going on for about 35 years,” explains Anderegg. When VINS shifted its focus to its new nature center in Quechee,

Vt., a group of educators spun off to form the Four Winds Nature Institute to continue to offer community-based environmental education.

Now the institute consists of two full-time and six part-time employees, all of who work from their homes, which not only cuts back on overhead costs but promotes flexible professional lifestyles for this focused handful. The Nature Program is one of four projects the Institute has its hands on; the others include a program for preschool teachers, a program for Upper Valley teachers who want to make the environment a continuing part of their curriculum, and a partner-

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Parent volunteer Luci Wilson (right) and her daughter prepare cups of water to simulate maple sap.

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ship with the Statewide Environmental Education Program (SWEET) focused on developing an environmental literacy program. “We want to be able to teach schools how to build a sense of place into



Volunteer Juanisa McDonald

their curriculum,” says Anderegg.

These eight people are making remarkable strides toward a future of environmental vitality by teaching the next generations how to foster a symbiotic relationship with the natural world. Perhaps school children will learn the art of commitment as well as how to make maple syrup when the nature program comes to visit.

TEACHING PARENTS, PARENTS TEACHING

It’s not just the determined dedication of employees that makes the Four Winds Nature Program successful. “Volunteers make the program work,” says Anderegg. “Look at the numbers. We have seven people training — if we relied on only those seven instructors, our reach would be pretty limited. If we train volunteers to teach another 15,000 people, it magnifies the impact.”

Relying on volunteers also makes the program affordable in this era of belt tightening. “I think one of the things that is most valuable about the program is that it broadens the curriculum for the students without adding much to the school budget,” says Jen Duby, mom of two who has volunteered with the nature program at Enfield Village School for the past two years.

The program costs between \$2,000 and \$5,000; much of that is often covered by fundraising events, grants from the PTO, or donations from the local Lion’s Club. Smaller schools are often encouraged to pool their resources and share the training to make it more affordable. “And in a time when many schools are having to cut what some consider to be extras — such as art, music, languages — it is so special that we are able to bring this kind of learning to the students,” Duby adds.

Barb Slaiby has been volunteering at the Lebanon, N.H., elementary schools for the past three years. “It does take time,” this Lebanon, N.H., mother of two says. “It’s definitely harder than baking a box of cookies!” But the investment is worth it. “One of the little boys came running out of the classroom a few days

Want to Help?

The Four Winds Nature Program (www.fwni.org) is always looking for volunteers. Contact your local school to join the fun, or call Rob Anderegg at (802) 353-9440 to start a new program.

after I’d done a lesson and called, ‘Mrs. Slaiby, Mrs. Slaiby, Four Winds was so much fun this week, thank you, thank you!’”

While the sheer numbers of children being exposed to environmental learning are impressive, there’s something else pretty special at work in the classroom. “It’s important for kids to see parents as co-learners and co-teachers,” says Anderegg. “It’s an example of lifelong learning and teaching: education doesn’t happen just in Mr. Johnson’s class, it can happen anywhere, it can happen in your own backyard.”

Anderegg embodies that sensibility. Trained as a chemist, he taught at the University of Maine and then stayed home with his two children when they were young. He joined VINS in 2002.



A second grader shows off his newfound knowledge of maple trees.

"I've always been interested in nature. This lets me do something I really enjoy."

GROWING THE FUTURE

But why not spend any extra funds on furthering the reading, writing and math abilities that kids will need to compete in the global arena? Why is environmental literacy important?

"One of the consequences of being technologically wired is that kids get disconnected from the outside world," says Anderegg. "iPods, texting, computer games — they don't get outdoors enough." Studies have shown that children who spend an inordinate time inside are more likely to suffer from depression, ADHD, anxiety and obesity. We're slowly becoming aware of the impact of our plugged-in lifestyles, and the picture isn't pretty. Taking a walk and trying to spy different species of birds isn't only fun, it's also healthy for our bodies and good for our brains.

Slaiby agrees that going outside is important. "Kids don't get out poking around as much as they used to," she comments. "It's a good opportunity to spark an interest in nature." Hopefully, poking around in the woods and fields will develop into a habit.

"We also want to have people be able to look at problems like global warming, renewable energy and oil spills, and be able to come up with creative solutions," says Anderegg. "We need people who understand how problems fit together." Our world is changing at a rapid rate, and our children are going to be the ones left to heal the unhealthy habitats we've created. If they never venture beyond their desks at school, how are they going to confront the major issues of this century, and how are they going to care enough about the planet to want to?

Perhaps Kathe Estes, kindergarten teacher at Enfield Village School, cites the most compelling reason: "The kids just love it!" UVL

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