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Indian Hollow students learn all about watersheds at Blandy Experimental Farm

By MOLLY WILLIAMS The Winchester Star
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Fourth graders from Indian Hollow Elementary School along with teacher Ginny Carney (center) observe a wetland during a trip to Blandy Experimental Farm in Boyce on Monday during their studies of watershed areas which is fun by a grant through the Chesapeake Bay Restoration Fund.

Jeff Taylor/The Winchest

BOYCE — Fourth grade students from Frederick County’s Indian Hollow Elementary School sat on rugs arranged in the middle of a sunny field on Monday, searching for tiny organisms inside buckets of water and identifying plants growing in the area.

On what was their first day back from spring break, the students visited Blandy Experimental Farm. Their field trip featured activities which built upon what they learned during their first visit to the 712-acre research facility in the fall.

“Take a look around, maybe do a 360,” said Emily Ford, lead environmental educator at Blandy. “What looks the same or what looks different from when you were here?”

“The rocks look the same,” a student answered.

“There’s more vegetation,” said another.

“It looks different,” one child said, “because I didn’t know there was a pond over there.”

He was right. The small body of water to their right had been dry in the fall. Today, though, they’d be learning all about it.

In partnership with Frederick County Public Schools, Blandy has been facilitating these field trips for all of the division’s fourth graders for the past three years. The aim is to give students hands-on, locally relevant experiences about the watershed in which they live, how they impact it and how they can help protect it.

“This program is called a Meaningful Watershed Education Experience, MWEE for short,” said Candace Lutzow-Felling, Blandy’s director of education for prekindergarten-grade 12 programs. “It’s a program that all school children throughout the Chesapeake Bay region are engaged in at some level. And it’s resulting from the Chesapeake Bay Agreement.”

The Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement established a vision for conservation, stewardship, clean water and community engagement in an effort to restore and protect the Bay.

MWEEs were designed to support that community engagement goal, with the hope that students throughout the bay region will experience one MWEE in elementary, middle and high school at minimum.

“We all live in a watershed,” said Lutzow-Felling. “Everybody, all the plants, all the animals, all the people. And we all need clean, healthy water to have good lifestyles. So that’s why it’s important. It’s good to learn that.”

Students rotated through three stations Monday. Adjacent to the pond, they were placed into groups and assigned an animal with a list of needs, like food and soil type.

They searched around the pond for the different plants that can grow in a watershed and conducted a soil sample. From there, they had to conclude if their assigned animal could thrive in that area.

In another activity, they took a look at how water moves over the land to study erosion. And in the third station, they came up with ways to combat erosion and its impacts on their watershed.

Ginny Carney, a fourth grade teacher at Indian Hollow, said this kind of experience is “a lot better than being in the classroom reading a book.”

“They love being outside and hands-on,” she continued. “... It’s nice to start it outside and then bring it in.”

That’s another big aspect of the partnership between Blandy and FCPS — transferring what students learn at the farm into their own classrooms.

“So they come here and they learn the basics of what a watershed is, how it functions, how erosion can impact our waterways and how they can help clean up the erosion,” Lutzow-Felling said. “... And then back at school, they apply some of what they’ve learned to come up with, to identify an environmental issue at their school that they could perhaps help alleviate.”

For example, she said that one school has a path that kids take to recess which often floods. Students are now thinking about possible solutions for the erosion and flooding.

FCPS is currently funding these trips to Blandy through a grant from the Virginia Chesapeake Bay Restoration Fund.

Lutzow-Felling said the ultimate goal is to have these MWEEs take place in-house so that they can continue for years to come.

“We want it to be a sustainable program, or something that schools can afford,” Lutzow-Felling said.

The Chesapeake Bay watershed spans six states along the East Coast, from New York to Virginia. And despite being such a vital part of life for many living creatures, its condition has long been a cause for concern. Pollution has impacted the water quality, biodiversity and land in and around the bay.

This program helps to foster an appreciation for and understanding of the watershed's importance in young students, with the hope that they'll go forward in life armed with the knowledge and resources to restore, preserve and protect their environment.

As they dug their hands into the soil, called out the names of watershed plants and excitedly identified the little creatures swimming around in the water, it was clear that for at least some of the students present on Monday, these lessons would have an impact.

"It's place-based," said Ford. "It's getting them hands-on and thinking or making a connection with their environment."

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