LOCAL NEWS

Fairmont third-graders become Watershed Explorers

Vacaville elementary students get outside to get hands on with nature

Fairmont Charter Elementary School third-grade students examine the wildlife living in the lake during a field trip to the Lagoon Valley Regional Park to study the watershed and surrounding area Monday in Vacaville. The program is organized by the Solano Resource Conservation District and brings students to open spaces around the county for hands-on environmental education. (Joel Rosenbaum / The Reporter)

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Science lessons are not limited to just the classroom. As scores of third-graders throughout Solano County will learn over the next two months, they can be found by going outside, and one place where the lessons of nature can be found in abundance is in local waterways.

Through March 23, Solano Resource Conservation District (RCD) is hosting a series of field trips to local watersheds to give students an opportunity to learn about their local tributaries, what wildlife can be found there and what steps people can take to ensure they are kept clean. On Monday, third-graders at Fairmont Charter Elementary School visited Lagoon Valley Park, where they observed fauna, studied invertebrates and planted native grass.

Lee Ascencio, Solano RCD program manager, said Lagoon Valley was a great showcase for watersheds and one that not all students had been to themselves.

“It’s very accessible for them, it’s a way they can get outside and connect with nature, but a lot of students don’t get opportunities to come here,” she said. “It’s really showing students what they have access to in their city, and I think it really helps them connect with their local nature and their water and really understanding how they are connected to their land and what impacts they can make on their city and the environment.”

Students broke off into groups led by program educators Sierra Cecchini, Wendy Low, Paula Marckesano-Jones, Alex Meyer, Isabel Realyvasquez, and Marisela Villegas who brought them to different stations to do different activities. Cecchini and Villegas’ group began by observing the lake.

Using a pair of binoculars, John Castillo, 9 of Vacaville, a third grader at Fairmont Charter Elementary School studies an acorn woodpecker perched in a tree during a field trip Monday to Lagoon Valley Regional Park.Ê(Joel Rosenbaum / The Reporter)

"Today, you're all watershed explorers," Cecchini said. "Actually, from here on out, I hope for the rest of your life, you will be a watershed explorer and think like a scientist."

Cecchini reminded the students that Solano RCD educators had stopped by their classrooms and talked to them about local water resources and how

Students were given journals that had local maps on the back of them, where Cecchini asked them to point out where Vacaville is located and also quizzed them on where Vacaville's water flows to, the answer being the Sacramento River.

"All of our runoff, the stormwater, is going to the river," she said.

Cecchini said the water goes to the Sacramento River through a storm drain and even tally ends up in the Pacific Ocean.

"If I were to drop some trash right here, it might end up in the ocean," she said. "I want you to think about that connection and ways we can improve that."

Students watched the lagoon and made observations about the birds they saw, which included lots of ducks and geese.

"One just ate a fish," a student could be heard exclaiming. "One ducked its head into the water," another declared. One also commented on a discarded apple and wondered if the ducks would try to eat it.

However, students also were able to observe much smaller critters. Earlier in the morning, water had been scooped out of the lagoon and emptied into trays where students were asked to identify what they found. These included tadpoles, water gliders and other small creatures. They were also asked to sketch them in their journals.

"When you're looking, I want you to notice as many things as you can," Cecchini said. "Some of them have kind of cool dance moves, some of them have weird-looking legs or antennas, some of them have kind of funny colors. I want you to notice all of these things and ask questions."

Solano Resource Conservation District docent, Sierra Cecchini (left) leads a group of "watershed explorers" from Fairmont Charter Elementary School in Vacaville on a hike Monday through Lagoon Valley Park.(Joel Rosenbaum / The Reporter)

Students then took a short hike to a storm drain and were given binoculars to observe everything from cows to a woodpecker perched against a tree.

Cecchini said that everything that goes into a storm drain flows into the ocean.

"I have a good feeling you're all experts," she said. "You know that trash, motor oil and pet waste, that is pollution, but not a lot of people know that what goes down here never gets home."

Cecchini asked students to be "watershed heroes" by telling their parents or guardians and friends what happens to stormwater once it leaves cities and streets.

This year, Solano RCD was presented with native grasses to plant, and students helped with the process for the final activity.

"You are going to help us plant some beautiful native plants here at the park," Cecchini said. "We're hoping to plant 10,000 plants this year, and you're gonna help be part of that 10,000 plants."

Ascencio said she hoped the activities got students excited about learning about their local environment beyond just that one day.

"I hope that they'll come away from this field trip today feeling like they can

Elsewhere in Solano County, Fairfield-Susiun students will be doing similar activities at Rockville Hills Regional Park, Dixon students will go to Valley Glen Pond, Rio Vista students will visit Sandy Beach, and Benicia and Vallejos students will explore Glen Cove Waterfront Park.

Funding for the Watershed Explorers program comes from the Solano County Water Agency, Solano County Department of Resource Management, Vallejo Flood and Wastewater District, and Vallejo Water Conservation Program. Fairfield-Suisun Sewer District, Potrero Hills Landfill and the seven cities of Solano County.

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