

Thursday, June 4, 2009

River Xchange project brings water to life



Celia Hanlon and Christopher Grendell, left, listen as James Lafley of the DCR and Rachael Helfrick, fourth-grade teacher, explain an experiment. At right, Jack Casey is ready to get started. (T&G Staff Photo/MARK C. IDE)

By **Sandy Meindersma** CORRESPONDENT

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HOLDEN — The fourth-graders in Rachael Helfrick's class at Dawson School can tell you why it's a good thing there are mayflies in Massachusetts.

With the help of James Lafley, education coordinator of the Department of Conservation and Recreation, the class has been learning about their local watershed and how their own activities can affect the drinking water of people miles away.

The class is one of 18 worldwide, and the only one in Massachusetts, participating in a multidisciplinary project called River Xchange, which is headquartered in New Mexico.

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The project paired Mrs. Helfrick's class with a class in New Mexico. The two classes compared notes about their watersheds, sharing information via a private Web log.

Some of the activities include building a model watershed, mapping activities, an Internet scavenger hunt and a personal water usage experiment.

"Each lesson is a hands-on activity, and then the students write a reflective summary, which gets posted on our blog," Mrs. Helfrick said. "One of the things they were really excited to learn was that our water goes into the Red Sox's showers."

As a result of the class's participation in River Xchange, Mrs. Helfrick was awarded a Certificate of Excellence for Commitment to Energy and Environmental Education by the state's Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs.

"Since they've learned that only 10 percent of the Earth's water is fresh water and only 1 percent is drinkable, I've seen the way the class uses water has changed," Mrs. Helfrick said. "There are fewer trips to the bathroom, and they take shorter drinks at the water fountain.

"I'm proud of the kids and of their awareness. It's impressive to see that they're starting to apply what they've learned to their own personal lives," she said.

Mrs. Helfrick said she definitely wants to continue studying the watershed with her class. "Next year, my goal is to have a watershed festival."

Mr. Lafley has been stopping by once or twice a week to teach a lesson about the watershed, and pollution and the rivers' food web were recent topics of the day.

Mr. Lafley passed around samples of insects taken from the reservoir and then helped the students build a food pyramid.

And why is it good that there are mayflies in Massachusetts?

"Mayflies are intolerant of pollution," Mr. Lafley said. "When I was growing up, there were only mayflies in Vermont and New Hampshire. The fact that we have them now in Massachusetts means that there is less pollution. It's annoying for people, but good for the environment."

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At left, Grant Arbout and Patrick Lei check out duck weed. Above, Sydney LaPointe observes a water insect. (SANDY MEINDERSMA PHOTOS)

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