



Educating for the Future of the Environment

By Rachel Stern, Science Interchange Reporter

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For Laurette Rogers, a shrimp is a big thing.

In 1992, Rogers, then a fourth grade teacher, wanted to integrate environmental education into her classroom. The perfect opportunity came when the children in her class expressed their concern for endangered species. They decided to help a local endangered species of shrimp.

After researching shrimp, the kids, who called themselves the Shrimp Club, conducted their first restoration project at a ranch in Stemple Creek in Marin County, Calif. The shrimp clung to the roots of the trees they planted, giving them footholds to migrate up the creek. The Shrimp Club and Laurette Rogers have done much the same thing for students: by providing the proper tools, environmental education gives students a love of the environment and the footholds to accomplish something in protecting it. Environmental education at an early age has proven important to these students' future work, and other teachers and organizations in Marin have followed to provide such experiences.

After working on the restoration project every year with a partner teacher, Ruth Hicks, Rogers developed a program called Students and Teachers Restoring a Watershed (STRAW). Ten years after one fourth-grade class' desire to do something about endangered species has turned into 80 classes, kindergarten through high school.

"It's important for kids to connect to the environment in those formative years," said Rogers, whose mother often took her hiking when she was young. Rogers is currently the Watershed Education Director for STRAW at the Bay Institute.

Erin Howes, who was a member of the second Shrimp Club, said that helping the shrimp was the first step on a road of environmental activism for her. "My environmental education started with the Shrimp Club," said Howes, now a freshman at the University of Oregon. "Through it, I developed an appreciation for every individual species."

When she attended Sir Francis Drake High School in San Anselmo, Calif., Howes joined the Environmental Science Academy, or SEA-Disc, a two-year program where environmental science, government and economics are studied through projects and community restoration. Her senior year, she interned with Science Interchange, a local media organization, as a member of the Teen Environmental Media Network, where she further broadened her awareness of environmental issues.

"I plan to take all the inspiration I have gained and apply that to my future career," said Howes, who said she wants to continue in environmental journalism.

Aaron Mihaly, a member of the first Shrimp Club, has come a long way since his days as a fourth grader. "Being introduced to activism at such a young age really enabled me to do something about it," said Mihaly.

Throughout high school, Mihaly was one of the leaders of an environmental club at Marin Academy and was in charge of the school's garden. Today, as a sophomore at Harvard, he's involved with an environmental education coalition, where he participates in an inter-dorm competition for conservation.

Aaron's younger sister Elena is now a junior at Sir Francis Drake High School and student in SEA-Disc. "My brother was a really big role model for me," said Elena. "I saw how much of a difference he could make and I wanted to make that difference myself."

Elena co-founded EYECOM, the Environmental Youth Education Council of Marin. After going to a meeting of EECOM, the Environmental Education Council of Marin, she decided that there should be a youth section to get more young people involved. "To get people to fix problems locally will help them get out and fix them more broadly," said Elena.

EYECOM is a branch on the tree of EECOM, which brings together over 80 Marin County environmental organizations in Marin, including businesses, non-profit organizations and schools. It is also a sponsor of this column.

"When you work in the environment, it feels like you're giving something to teachers and students," said Sandy Wallenstein, EECOM's executive director, and not something that is purely academic. "It's like giving people this great experience of beauty."

Sheila Molyneux, executive director of School Environmental Education Docents (SEED), also realized the importance of interacting with the environment at an early age. "When kids don't have that hands-on opportunity, they won't care about nature enough to protect it when they get older," said Molyneux.

Molyneux started SEED six years ago, when her youngest daughter was in kindergarten. As a parent, she saw that teachers needed another set of hands to take the kids outside. Today, classrooms of third through fifth graders come to visit her in a local garden, where Molyneux provides them with an interactive experience. They look through binoculars, learn about the plant and animal species around them, and plant seeds.

What message does she want the kids to leave with?

"It's cool to care," said Molyneux. "If you fall in love with something, then you want to protect it."

Even if it is as small as a shrimp.

RESOURCES

STRAW: www.bay.org/watershed_education.html

School Environmental Education Docents (SEED): <http://seed.marin.k12.ca.us/>

SEA-Disc: <http://drake.marin.k12.ca.us/academics/seadisc/homepage.htm>