

The Day May 31, 2024

East Lyme student-scientists use grant to explore marine ecosystem, wildlife



Larissa Graham, left, education director of the Connecticut National Estuarine Research Reserve, talks to first-grade children, from Flanders Elementary School in East Lyme, about the fish and blue crab she found in the water earlier Thursday, May 30, 2024, at Rocky Neck State Park. The school was one of the 10 Connecticut schools to receive an environmental protection grant. (Dana Jensen/The Day)

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Harvey Uzhuri takes a close look at a blue crab while he and his fellow first graders from Flanders Elementary School in East Lyme attend a Connecticut National Estuarine Research Reserve program Thursday, May 30, 2024, at Rocky Neck State Park. The school was one of the 10 Connecticut schools to receive an environmental protection grant. (Dana Jensen/The Day)

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From left, Jolie Isenberg, a summer college intern, and Ashley Hamilton, monitoring lead, both with Connecticut National Estuarine Research Reserve, shows Marshal Galvin and his fellow first graders from Flanders Elementary School the underside of a horseshoe crab Thursday, May 30, 2024. The school was among 10 Connecticut schools to receive an environmental protection grant. (Dana Jensen/The Day)

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By **Terell Wright, Special to The Day**

Niantic — On Thursday, 58 student-scientists from Flanders Elementary School's first grade spent the day investigating the ocean and its wildlife at Rocky Neck State Park in Niantic.

Throughout the field trip, students took pictures of the beach on iPads, learned the importance of wetlands protection and viewed ocean wildlife in jars. Before leaving, the scientists discussed their experience discovering the ocean.

The programs were hosted by Larissa Graham, the education director for the Connecticut National Estuarine Research Reserve, and several students from UConn Avery Point.

The visit was part of an environmental education plan piloted by first-grade teacher Laura Moore. Earlier this year, she received a \$5,000 grant to help her students to understand the ocean.

The inaugural Long Island Sound Schools network funded 10 Connecticut and New York schools to help promote watershed protection along Long Island Sound. Funds came from several community partners, including the Environmental Protection Agency and were facilitated by Connecticut Sea Grant and Mercy University.

Moore's environmental curriculum emphasizes that learning about the environment doesn't have to be negative. Students' engagement with their world not only encourages them to care about the Earth but also to have fun while doing it.

"[Families] love that their children are getting outside, that they're having hands-on experiences, that they're having fun, and that they are learning in a very organic way," said Moore on Wednesday.

Jolie Isenburg, a junior at UConn Avery Point interning with the Connecticut National Estuarine Research Reserve, says educating students about their ecosystem is pivotal to empowering the next generation of energized environmental leaders.

A 2021 study from The Lancet Planetary Health Journal found that 84% of young people globally were worried about climate change, with 75% believing the future is frightening.

"Climate anxiety is a real problem that a lot of young people face nowadays. And I think that if we keep trying our best to help the environment and spread awareness on how we as people impact it, we could change the planet for the better," said Isenburg.

She said getting students excited about the environment mitigates climate anxiety and pushes them toward positive, sustainable commitments for the future.

“These kids are all so engaged. That means we have a bunch of future scientists on our hands, and that could help us,” Isenburg added.

The effect of students engaging with their surroundings extends beyond environmentalism. In 2019, children spent an average of 6 minutes a day playing outside, compared to 7.5 hours on electronic screens, according to WebMD.

By investigating their world, students are learning and growing alongside each other.

“For our youngest students, we need to have them really hands-on communicating, really putting everything together and learning from one another,” Moore said.

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