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Wildlife lessons

Federal agency puts class in touch with nature.

By JANESE HEAVIN of the Tribune's staff*Published Saturday, April 21, 2007**Parker Eshelman photo*

University of Missouri-Columbia students, from left, Jason Smyth with an American kestrel and Katie Grimes with a great horned owl participate in an environmental program yesterday at Lee Elementary School. The SEEDS program is an acronym for Students, the Environment and Endangered Species.

Lee Elementary School fifth-graders spent this week learning about endangered species in Boone County, part of a program aimed to reconnect kids to nature.

Through the SEEDS program - or Students, the Environment and Endangered Species - federal biologists brought live animals into the classroom and talked to kids about what they can do to help the endangered creatures.

On Monday, biologist Heidi Kuska let the students feed and water brown bats; Tuesday, biologist Andy Roberts showed off a shovelnose sturgeon; and yesterday, Jill Utrup led a raptor program that featured a great horned owl and an American kestrel.

"Most of our kids know nature through technology," fifth-grade teacher Jona Toalson said. "This lets them know the real thing."

Columbia Ecological Services of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service sponsored the SEEDS program in an effort to combat "nature-deficit disorder," said Becky Clearwater, the administrative officer of the Columbia field office. "Technology has a tight grasp on early learners," she said. By not getting outdoors as much, "they're missing a key element in learning."

She said the agency wanted to partner with Lee because it's a downtown school with little

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green space around the asphalt playground. "They're not getting exposure to nature," Clearwater said.

Lee Principal Teresa VanDover said the environmental program also fits nicely into the school's expressive arts curriculum. She pointed to students getting a chance to feel the rough texture of the sturgeon, a contrast to the types of textures Lee students typically learn about in their arts programs.

"Art comes from nature, so there's a direct tie for me," VanDover said. "Our children are getting some once-in-a-lifetime experiences through this program."

The Fish and Wildlife Service also donated a 110-gallon fish aquarium to Lee, which was put in the school's media center. The aquarium contains Topeka shiners, small, endangered minnows on the decline in Missouri because of pollution.

SEEDS, which wraps up today with a book fair at Barnes & Nobel bookstore, kicks off a partnership between the school and the Fish and Wildlife Service. Next year, the agency hopes to be able to take children on a field trip, Clearwater noted.

The Fish and Wildlife Service is also looking to expand SEEDS to other Columbia schools in the future.

"We want to develop and appreciation for and heighten awareness about what's outside," Clearwater said. With so many other activities, "society has forgotten about getting kids outside."

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