America’s Great Outdoors and conservation education

The National Fish Hatchery System Volunteer Act of 2006 mandated that the Fisheries Program increase awareness of the conservation work delivered at Fisheries Program facilities through incorporation of outdoor classrooms and other conservation education programs. The Fisheries Program has provided quality conservation educational opportunities at the community level for decades.

As called for in President Obama’s America’s Great Outdoors Initiative, the Fisheries Program connects with today’s young generations by engaging families in conservation. Working in cooperation with volunteers, partners, and formal Friends groups, the Fisheries Program delivers a wide array of formal and informal conservation education programs both on and off Fisheries field stations at national and community levels.

With thousands of outreach and educational events every year, the Fisheries Program reaches well over one million youth alone. Biologists and professional educators communicate conservation issues through innovative, science-based, hands on learning, incorporating programs such as Biologist in Training; Kids in the Creek; and Salmon Fest. Through many of our 154 facilities nationwide, people of all ages experience inspired moments, learning about fish, plants and bugs, and science and conservation. These educational experiences plant the seeds of stewardship that may blossom into conservation careers. ✶ Denise Wagner

Discovering Burnt Island

Through hands-on experience, youth in Maine learn about the wild animals that live in coastal habitats.

The Maine Department of Marine Resources has transformed the Burnt Island Light Station, located on a five-acre island off Boothbay Harbor, into an outstanding educational facility. Before bringing their middle school classes for an overnight stay, teachers attend a weeklong course on the island. The training provides hands-on learning in the multidisciplinary curriculum, which covers topics related to Maine’s marine environment and maritime history – ecology of the Gulf of Maine, coastal ecology and geology, navigation and history, marine fisheries, and sport fishing. All curriculum activities are aligned with the state education standards. While on the island, students learn first-hand through explorations that include searching tide pools, digging in mud flats, studying beach sands, using compass and GPS units on a treasure hunt, climbing up the lighthouse, and fishing off the shore or dock for mackerel and pollock. Even in the fog, it is an experience to remember.

Though the island and buildings are owned by the state of Maine, the education staff and programs are funded primarily with Dingell-Johnson Sport Fish Restoration monies. These funds come from federal manufacturing excise taxes on fishing tackle, boat-trolling motors, and motorboat fuels distributed to state fish and wildlife agencies. The funds support fish management activities and boating access development to benefit anglers and boaters, and aquatic resource education programs for the public. ✶ Libby Hopkins