

Refuge environmental ed programs shift into high gear

by Candace Ward

Fall is an exciting time in the environmental education program at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. As we kick off a new school year, we expect to see students, their parents, and teachers coming to the Refuge for field trips. Not only do students benefit educationally from our field trips, but also they enjoy learning outdoors in beautiful fall colors before the winter snow falls.

At the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge the environmental education program seeks to teach young people ecological principles and how they apply to daily life and to wildlife populations on the Refuge. Through our programs we hope young people come to understand and appreciate their public lands and learn to care for and protect them in the future.

Our environmental education programs include:

1) Animals and their Senses - This program is for K-1st grades and helps children learn about their own senses and those of animals. It lays a foundation for empathy and respect for wildlife at a young age. In many cases this program helps children develop a life long interest in and concern for wildlife.

2) The Role of Predators in Nature - Are wolves really like the big, bad wolf in Little Red Riding Hood? What is the true story of predators? Predators play an important role in maintaining healthy wildlife populations of grazing animals such as moose, caribou, and snowshoe hare. Yet, people often view them in negative way. Through this program children in 2nd-3rd grades learn about the real role of predators and their importance in the natural world.

3) The Role of Fire in the Ecosystem - Fire is an essential part of change in Alaskan ecosystems. Fire can be both beneficial and harmful to wildlife. In this program 4th-6th grade youth learn how certain wildfires help wildlife and habitat. They also learn when fire is unsafe and not appropriate.

4) Wetlands and Wildlife - Wetlands are often viewed as “wastelands” by many people. However, wetlands serve diverse and life sustaining functions for both people and wildlife. Through this educational

unit students in 4th grade through middle school learn about the variety of wetlands in Alaska. They also find out how the clean water they drink and the fish they eat are linked to preserving healthy wetlands.

5) Leave No Trace - Through an overnight field trip at the Refuge Outdoor Education Center, students in 5th to middle school learn the six principles for safe, low impact outdoor experiences. Students use problem solving skills to make decisions on trip planning, low impact travel routes, preparing safe drinking water, safe use of camp stoves, bear safety, and how to properly deal with trash and human waste. Students learn skills that will serve them well throughout their entire lives and will also help protect their public lands.

Since 1983, over 40,000 Kenai Peninsula youth have participated in environmental education field trips to Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. We have enjoyed the support and participation of educators including parents, teachers, and youth leaders. We feel encouraged when we hear comments from students, such as - “I never knew anything lived in the lake till this field trip,” or “wolves have to hunt to survive not because they are mean,” or “packing out my trash really isn’t so hard.” It’s also exciting to get feedback for students who tell us that through our programs they learned to love nature and enjoy outdoor activities.

If you are interested in learning more about Kenai National Wildlife Refuge’s Environmental Education Program contact us at 262-7021 or check out the Refuge website at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/> and click on the Kenai Peninsula.

Candace Ward is a park ranger at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, who has facilitated the Refuge Environmental Education Program since 1984. She enjoys sharing nature with kids of all ages and pursues outdoor activities including hiking, canoeing, wildlife observation, and northern lights watching while soaking in her hot tub.

Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.