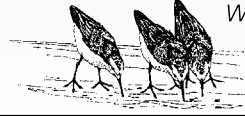


Spring 2006

# Tideline

San Francisco Bay National  
Wildlife Refuge Complex



## Act Locally, Make Friends Globally *How a Salamander brought Russian and American students together*

Volume 26, Number 1

By Ken Clarkson

As we sat in our seats at the Children's Palace of Moscow, listening to the emcee speak in Russian, we were able to ascertain a few familiar words "...United States... Ellicott Slough... Refuge... Renaissance ..."

It was then that our translator leaned over to us and said, "You must stand now and wave! They are introducing you!"

As we rose we were greeted by applause and camera flashes. We were attending the All-Russian Friends of Zapovedniks Youth Congress. A Zapovednik is the Russian counterpart to our national wildlife refuges. Our group consisted of four students from Renaissance High School in La Selva Beach in Santa Cruz County - Tanya Felix, Daniel Mendoza, Jackie Renteria, and John Bejarana - all 17 and seniors. They were accompanied by their teacher Shoshana Coplan, and me - Ken Clarkson, an environmental educator for the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

We had been invited by the Zapovednik EcoCenter of Moscow to join over 500 youths from Russia for a week to share information about the conservation of refuges, visit area refuges, exchange music, and in the process, make new friends. The story of this unique gathering originated in three unlikely locations: Moscow, Russia, Arlington, VA, and at a small national wildlife refuge in southern Santa Cruz County.

### Santa Cruz County

Ellicott Slough National Wildlife Refuge is only 201 acres in size, yet it is one of the few remaining homes for the endangered Santa Cruz long-toed salamander (*Ambystoma macrodacty-*

*lum croceum*) and the threatened California tiger salamander (*Ambystoma californiense*). This refuge, created in 1975, is one of seven national wildlife refuges in the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Complex and contains critical habitat for the salamanders. Each year, when the winter rains arrive, the salamanders begin their annual pilgrimage to and from an ephemeral (temporary) pond.

Juveniles from the previous year are the first to emerge from their underground burrows beneath the pond site. They soon leave the vicinity to search for safe havens in the outlying hills. This journey could take them as far as one mile from the pond, quite a distance for a creature only 8-10 cm long. Along the way, the juveniles are likely to pass adult males heading the opposite direction towards the pond. Once the pond has finally filled with water, adult females arrive to be greeted by awaiting males. Mating occurs and females soon lay eggs. Afterwards, adults depart, leaving the resulting larvae to live out an aquatic existence. As the rains abate and the pond slowly disappears, the larvae metamorphose into a juvenile form and disappear beneath the surface to the safety of moist soil below, thus completing the cycle.

A long-toed salamander may live to be 10 years old if it overcomes the many hazards that it may encounter along its journey. There are roads



*Renaissance High School's delegation to the youth conference in Russia- (left to right) Daniel Mendoza, Shoshana Coplan, John Bejarana, their interpreter Evgeniya Parnasova, Tanya Felix, and Jackie Renteria in front of St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow.*

*Continued page 2*

# How a Salamander brought Russian

*Continued from page 1*

and railroad tracks to cross, years of drought, habitat loss, diseases, and predators to avoid. To help these small animals surmount these obstacles, the refuge has enlisted a group of volunteers to participate in restoration projects. While the refuge is closed to the public to help protect these animals, a small group of students from Renaissance High School are volunteering to help with habitat restoration and data collection.

Renaissance High School lies adjacent to the refuge and is nestled among the ancient dunes of a remnant coastal oak woodland community of La Selva Beach. The first building encountered on the Renaissance campus is a greenhouse, unusual for any school. The salamanders are not the only individuals near La Selva Beach on the road to recovery. Renaissance school is a continuation high school, which serves students that have fallen behind in credits, thus getting them back on track for graduation. For two years students at this school have been participating in several projects to help improve habitat at the refuge and also to collect valuable data for biological

monitoring. Each fall, groups have ventured among the refuge lowland shrubs and trees to collect acorns and coffeeberries. Inside the greenhouse, students propagate native plants, which they eventually plant back on the refuge.

Outside Shoshana Coplan's classroom window sits a rain gauge and a digital thermometer.

The annual salamander surveys need to be timed precisely when heavy storms saturate the ground. By collecting weather data adjacent to the refuge, the students help biologists better predict the timing for these surveys. A few students had the opportunity to assist biologists with these surveys, strapping on headlamps and donning raincoats on cold rainy nights to search the refuge periphery for the migrating amphibians. The landscape surrounding the refuge pond is dotted with occasional rows of inconspicuous blocks of wood. A closer inspection under this wood reveals a microcosm of insects, invertebrates, rodent burrows, and hopefully, a glimpse of a salamander. The students at Renaissance created and deployed these "coverboards" as a way for biologists to monitor the salamanders.

The students are also occasionally spotted wandering the refuge carrying small Palm Pilot handheld computers with attached GPS units. They are participating in a unique program called Naturemapping. Data such as wildlife tracks, scat, and/or direct observation of the animal is collected to map wildlife. This program helps build and update species inventories and map wildlife locations.

## Arlington, Virginia

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Division of International Conservation was searching for a group of young adults to participate in an opportunity thousands of miles away. The Renaissance High School students, based on their long-standing involvement with Ellicott Slough Refuge, were the perfect choice. Located in Arlington, Virginia, the Division of International Conservation promotes international conservation of biodiversity, with emphasis on rare or endangered species and their habitats. Approximately 100 American and Russian scientists take part in annual exchanges that began in 1972 with the signing of a bilateral agreement on cooperation in environmental protection.

## Moscow, Russia

In November 2005 the first exchange involving high school students occurred between this Division and the Russians. Based in Moscow, Zapovednik EcoCenter, a non government organization, coordinates environmental education and interpretation for many of the natural protected areas in Russia. The year 2005 marked the 3rd All-Russia Friends of Protected Areas Youth Congress, and the first time the invitation was extended to international youth groups. Renaissance High School was selected to be the first participant from the United States, and the only international group, to attend this gathering.

## Friends of Protected Areas Youth Congress

On October 31, 2005, after 27 hours of travel, our group arrived in Moscow. We were tired but energized by the new surroundings and the anticipation of the events to come. The students had prepared for this trip for several months - learning about the local culture and language, creating a poster presentation, and preparing a skit for the Youth Congress. Following a guided tour of the Kremlin, we navigated the Moscow Metro. Unlike the subways in the United States, the Metro was filled with elaborate mosaics, statues, and chandeliers. We eventually reached the Youth Congress site just south of the city.

The opening ceremonies occurred at the Children's Palace of Moscow and involved Russian students, educators, dignitaries from



*Student Daniel Mendoza encounters a California Tiger Salamander while assisting biologists with nighttime surveys at Ellicott Slough National Wildlife Refuge.*

# and American students together

the Russian Ministry of Natural Resources, land managers, and local musicians. During the poster presentations, a sea of small hands surrounded our group as they awaited the Blue Goose tattoos and other gifts we had brought as presents.

On the main stage of the Palace, the Renaissance students enlisted participation from the audience to help present their skit. "Oh nyet!!" the Russian audience cried on cue when they saw the antagonist scattering trash on the refuge, but then cheered wildly as the superhero salamander came to the rescue.

Later during the week the students at the Youth Congress divided into Master Classes. These classes discussed various topics such as how to better educate the public, how to create an environmentally-themed play, how to create interpretive signs for a trail, and how to conduct a sociology study for a refuge. The following day, each group presented its projects from their classes to the entire Youth Congress.

Each member of our group was provided with a translator while at this meeting. Since English is now taught in many of the Russian schools, the translator was usually a young Russian student. The students also participated in an excursion to nearby Prioksko-Terrasny Refuge where they had close encounters with European bison or "Zubers". Once reduced to only 50 animals in zoos, these giants are being bred for eventual release at refuges across Europe and Russia to restore this population to the wild.

The students from the Congress also shared an evening of music and dance, and an entire day in a friendly competition involving sports, challenge activities, and environmentally-themed games. However, the most lasting memories for the Renaissance students came from their time making friends and sharing experiences with their Russian counterparts.

"When I start talking about what we did, all I can think of are all my favorite things, some of which were touring, eating Russian food,

and of course meeting people... Definitely something I'm not going to soon forget," said Tanya Felix.

The experiences of this adventure have hopefully created an important foundation for future students to follow. The fourth Russian Congress will occur in 2007, with the hopes that students helping conservation efforts on refuges in the United States will again participate.

Elena Knizhnikova, Coordinator for the Zapovednik EcoCenter envisions even larger goals. She states, "It could be the start of a big joint effort to develop an international Friends of Protected Natural Areas movement,"

The momentum from this Congress also carries with it a sense of optimism. As student Daniel Mendoza said, "It is my belief that the new generation of environmentalist that I saw in Russia is going to pave the way for a better future in how they conserve nature. ...Russia has a very bright future ahead of it."

Perhaps the students from Renaissance share this future. As teacher Shoshana Coplan reflects, "These are not the usual high school suspects to attend a prestigious academic conference. They proved young people, no matter what stereotypes we hold about them, can take advantage of opportunities and succeed when given a chance."

Similarly, the same might be hoped for the salamanders.

*Ken Clarkson is an Environmental Education Specialist at the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Complex.*



*Russian students proudly display their Blue Goose tattoos with Environmental Education Specialist Ken Clarkson during the poster presentation at the Children's Palace of Moscow.*

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### San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Complex

Founded in 1974 and administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge exists to preserve wildlife habitat, protect threatened and endangered species, protect migratory birds, and provide opportunities for nature study. Six additional refuges are managed from the headquarters located in Fremont: San Pablo Bay NWR, Antioch Dunes NWR, Salinas River NWR, Ellicott Slough NWR, Marin Islands NWR, and Farallon NWR.

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