

Turtles bring the Bay into classrooms

Posted: Monday, November 15, 2010 12:00 am

By LINDSAY POWERS and NICOLE DAO Capital News Service |

ANNAPOLIS Elementary, middle and high school students are enjoying the company of diamondback terrapins in their classrooms as part of the Terrapin Connection program run by the Arlington Echo Outdoor Education Center in Millersville.

However, the interaction goes beyond just cleaning and feeding a classroom pet.

As the students observe and learn about the turtles throughout the school year, the terrapins become a significant part of their everyday education.

"It's a good activity because they're living animals ... and this is my first time ever having a live animal in (my classroom)," said Teigue Norman, a student at Nantucket Elementary School.

Like Teigue, the other students understand the threats facing the turtle population, including crab pots, predators and habitat loss.

In the protected classroom environment, however, the turtles grow safely and quickly while also allowing the students a unique hands-on learning experience.

Sue Hannahs, a biology and environmental science teacher at Severna Park High School, said the turtles' presence helps students better understand lessons about the Chesapeake Bay.

"(The turtles are) little additions that we have in the classroom that make it more real because we've got a real creature there that they can relate to," Hannahs said.

Danielle Stephenson, a middle school teacher at Arundel Middle School, has used the turtles as a springboard to topics concerning the Bay as well as other parts of the curriculum, including math and language arts.

Steve Barry, a coordinator at the Arlington Echo Outdoor Education Center, said he hopes students' enthusiasm for the turtles will transfer to a heightened sense of responsibility for the Bay.

In a recent visit to a Nantucket Elementary School classroom hosting a pair of turtles, Barry's test of the students' knowledge was met with eager responses.

"The little kids will tell you all about the terrapins," Barry said. "I think it is real neat to hear it from them."

While they serve as a unique tool for classroom lessons, the turtles also benefit from the program.

Raised in an environment with "Florida-like" warm air and water conditions, the turtles grow at a faster rate than they would have in the wild, making them less susceptible to predators.

About 200 terrapins are taken from their nests on Poplar Island in the bay, where the students will return them at the end of the school year. There are roughly 80 tanks throughout the county, with two turtles in each participating classroom.

Data collected by the students ultimately contributes to research by Willem M. Roosenburg, a professor at Ohio University.

Will Williams, who leads the program, has seen the value of the students' participation in "authentic research" involving a living aspect of the bay.

"The terrapin becomes a window for them learning about the natural history of the Chesapeake Bay, learning about the issues facing the terrapins and their conservation as a species in the (Bay)," Williams said.

TOWNNEWS
Online. Community. News.

© Copyright 2010, **The Star Democrat, Easton, MD.** Powered by Blox CMS from TownNews.com.