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FEATURED

Children get take-home conservation lessons

By Amy Oberlin aoberlin@kpcmedia.com Sep 11, 2019

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Matt Horsley, an Indiana Department of Natural Resources assistant fisheries biologist, explains biodiversity to Carlin Park Elementary School fourth-graders gathered near the inn beach at Pokagon State Park.

Amy Oberlin

LAKE JAMES — With support from the Ralph and Cheryl Taylor Conservation Fund and other area organizations, Steuben County fourth-graders took home three books in a cinch bag after a day spent at Pokagon State Park.

And some valuable lessons.

Tuesday, children from Carlin Park, Hendry Park, Ryan Park, Pleasant Lake and Fremont elementary schools participated in the annual Youth Conservation Field Day, hosted by the Steuben County Soil and Water Conservation District.

Among them was Pleasant Lake Elementary School student Kayelene Hart, great-granddaughter to Cheryl and the late Ralph Taylor. Her mother, Stacey Westfall, was a chaperone.

“This is awesome,” said Westfall. “Grandpa would have loved it.”

Tuesday morning, the children moved through six stations on a warm, sunny late summer day. They learned about wildlife from Pokagon Naturalist Nicky Ball. Other lessons included forestry, fish management, water quality and soils. In the Lake James Room of the Potawatomi Inn, the students watched a demonstration of erosion and learned how they could reduce impacts on the soil and watershed.

Before lunch, everyone gathered in the Lake James Room for a performance by the Dumpster Drummers. Through comedy and percussion, the three-man band teaches recycling and environmental conservation. The Dumpster Drummers’ motto is “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Rock!”

The Taylors’ endowment at the Steuben County Community Foundation allows the SWCD to send items home with the fourth-graders who participate in the field day. Other donors to the educational materials include the Steuben County Lakes Council and City of Angola MS4.

The speakers were state naturalists and representatives of local conservation organizations, including the Clear Lake Township Land Conservancy’s Bridget Harrison, who talked about how to keep watersheds clean.

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Each person can make an impact, said Harrison, by doing the things in his or her power to reduce phosphorus and bacteria going into the lakes and streams.

Harrison told the children about how Pokagon's main beach was closed temporarily during the Labor Day holiday due to unsafe E-coli levels. Animal waste, such as dog droppings washed into the lake, can raise E-coli levels. Part of Harrison's lesson was that if you have a dog, pick up its "poo."

She also talked about lawn fertilizer. While it is considered acceptable, if it is overused or applied prior to rainfall, it could wash from a lawn into a storm drain, then into a ditch, then into a stream, then into a lake. The phosphorus in the fertilizer causes blue-green algae, which is detrimental to healthy lake life and can occasionally become toxic.

After spending the day in the fresh air learning interactive lessons, the children got onto school buses where they each received a sport bag with three books in it. When they got home Tuesday evening, they could share with their families age-appropriate stories about how to protect the soil, what a watershed is and where storm water goes.

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