

Learning from Ant Hills

International conservation education program helps make schools greener

By Margo Pierce



Lunch in Cincinnati, lunch in Costa Rica — is there a difference?

Beyond the view, a significant difference is that you'll leave less trash behind when noshing in a rural area in the Central America country. Bethany Blevins learned that lesson last year.

"In the rural areas ... everywhere we went they had recycling bins that separated everything — paper, plastic, glass and organic," she says. "Every meal we ate, they served it on regular plates so that we wouldn't have any regular paper trash. We would scrape our food (scraps) into the organic bin, and they would go and compost that. It was a very green lifestyle, very sustainable."

Blevins was part of a group of educators and conservationists on an Earth Expeditions trip. A sixth-grade science teacher in the Mason School District, she's one of hundreds of people participating in the program offered by a partnership between the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden and Project Dragonfly at Miami University. The goal of Earth Expeditions is to build an alliance of individuals with "firsthand knowledge of inquiry-driven, community-based learning for the benefit of ecological communities, student achievement and global understanding."

Courses are offered in eight countries: Belize, Costa Rica, Kenya, Mongolia, Namibia, Thailand and Bahía de los Ángeles in the San Felipe Desert in Mexico. Courses visit sites that are actively engaged in doing some form of conservation work, and participants are introduced to the local ecosystem and community.

"With Earth Expeditions, we take these folks out into the field, introduce them to science methods in the field, to incredible communities," says David Jenike, vice president of Cincinnati Zoo. "We've tried to tie the best of both the organizations together: Project Dragonfly's approach to inquiry and the zoo's approach to conservation — not only getting out there and building the science skill and the inquiry skills, but the leadership skills to make a difference in the world."

'What interests you?'

The process of using inquiry gave Blevins an opportunity to see and experience things she'd only studied in books, she says.

"The whole focus of Earth Expeditions is inquiry and trying to bring that back into the classroom and how can we allow students to explore what interests them," she says. "One of the big things about inquiry for students is that it's so difficult to do because they just want the information to get the right answer on the test. And inquiry is the complete opposite; it's 'What interests you?'"

"One of the first things we did was we had to find something in the rainforest that spoke to us, and what jumped out of me were the ants. There are ants everywhere — if you stood still too long you would have ants all up and down your legs. ... So go observe the ants. Then whatever you come up with, that's the right answer because that's what you observed and that's what you found."

Every year since the program's inception in 2005, the number and diversity of applicants has grown. Teachers and other educators from all over the world now apply to participate. Earth Expeditions hopes to add Borneo and the Amazon to the 2010 course list, but it all depends on establishing mutually beneficial partnerships with organizations in those countries.

"We want to make sure the partners we're working with derive benefit from our coming to their countries," Jenike says. "In Kenya ... we did the course for the first time last year and we had a community day where we had Maasai elders come and talk about their culture, everything from their ethno-botany ... to the stages of the growth of a young warrior."

'So much resistance'

After an expedition, the participants develop and implement an inquiry project in a school setting or in the community that draws inspiration from some aspect of the trip. Blevins focused on lunch.

"My project was incorporating this whole green lifestyle and being less wasteful," she says. "What I tried to do was introduce the concept of a litter-less lunch. We collected data on how much trash we generate each day during lunch — how many trash bags — and then we got together with student council and advertised, 'For one day, this day next week, try to bring as little waste as possible.'"

"All the science teachers presented to their students ways they could waste less, such as packing your lunch in Tupperware instead of packing it in plastic bags, having a reusable lunch box and things like that."

Then came the obstacles. The food service staff wanted an estimate for how many of the 2,000-plus Mason High School students would be buying lunch that day. Losing revenue and having food go bad were the primary concerns. Using all-disposable products in the lunchroom — plates, utensils, even individual portion cups for fruit and condiments — meant that a significant reduction in trash would be difficult to sustain over time.

"I was surprised that I did get so much resistance," Blevins says. "It took me a couple weeks to get all the kinks worked out. It didn't turn out as I would have liked it, but it was a great learning experience."

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