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## Teacher participates in research in Kenya

By Liz Carey

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PENDLETON — For 10 days, Riverside Middle School teacher Justin Ballenger lived in the wilds of Kenya.

As part of the Earth Expeditions' Field Expedition program, Ballenger was immersed in the climate and culture of Kenya to learn about conservation in a place where wildlife and the community have come to live together.

"It was one of the most amazing experiences in my life. I feel like I was able to make such a connection with the people there," Ballenger said.

The international research experience is part of Project Dragonfly, a collaborative effort of Miami University in Ohio and the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden that provides educational and scientific research at conservation sites across the globe. Ballenger was one of 20 educators to visit the South Rift Valley stretching from the Maasai Mara National Reserve through Amboseli National Park in the East African country.

While there, educators partner with the African Conservation Centre, studying wildlife like lions and elephants; learning about the role of local tribes in the ecosystem; identifying conservation in parks and beyond; and learning from local knowledge.

After their return, educators also take Web-based classes to further their knowledge on conservation efforts.

Ballenger said he hopes to take what he learned back to the Pendleton-based Anderson School District 4 classroom.

"I want my students to realize that no matter how small they feel their role is in the world, they can have an impact," he said.

Ballenger said he hopes to work on returning with some students and church organizations to help with the area schools.

"I learned so much there," he said. "Most importantly, I learned that people are people no matter where you are."

District 4 Superintendent Lee D'Andrea said Ballenger's experience would add to his eighth-grade classroom teaching.

“It’s a wonderful opportunity for him, and for the district,” she said. “The fact he took this kind of initiative is an indication of his commitment to teaching and his students.”

Connie Malone, spokeswoman for Earth Expedition, said the experience was life-changing, not only for the educators, but for their students.

“We give them time after their field experiences before they go into the online learning portion of the class,” she said. “We want them to reflect on their experiences and have time to reflect on the process and their experiences. We want them to be able to come to grips with who they are as educators and who they are in the world. It really is a life-changing experience.”

Ballenger will return to the classroom with other District 4 teachers on Aug. 12. Students return on Aug. 17.



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