

## **Orono pupils unveil vernal pool project Service-learning targets natural woods habitats**

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ORONO - Pupils have taken an active role in their education at Orono Middle School, and on Monday, a group of eighth graders showed off one of their projects, a new sign about a vernal pool.

As part of a service learning endeavor, pupils in Jessica Archer's seventh-grade class have been studying vernal pools located behind the school for about three years.

The group of youngsters who presented Monday have been working on the project for two years.

The afternoon presentation was conducted primarily by pupils to show off the new sign they helped design to educate the public and other students about Lost Pond, a vernal pool located in the woods behind the school.

After about a 15-minute walk through the Orono athletic fields and up the winding Orono Land Trust path, the pupils stopped at the edge of Lost Pond, where their sign is located.

The project is considered service learning, which is something with which Orono schools are trying to get more involved, service learning coordinator Deta Pearce said.

Service learning is a classroom approach that fosters civic engagement and citizenship in students by engaging them in authentic community problems, needs and concerns.

"My goal is that we create an outdoor classroom," Pearce said.

**Marvin Rosenblum, a founder of KIDS Consortium, also attended Monday's program. KIDS is an acronym for Kids Involved Doing Service and is a supporter of the vernal pool program.**

"Students aren't problems to be solved or beneficiaries of our expertise," Rosenblum said. "As the project becomes yours, as you own it, nobody has to make you learn."

The nonprofit organization is based in Lewiston and works with teachers, administrators, and community partners to involve students in addressing real challenges faced by their communities.

"That's what you guys demonstrated today," Rosenblum said. "Power to the students."

Orono's vernal pool project is a perfect example of that partnership in that it involves teachers, students, community members, and professors at the University of Maine who have acted as guides and mentors.

A vernal pool on the school's property has been monitored for seven years by Maine Audubon Society volunteer John Maddus and University of Maine professor Aram Calhoun.

During the 2002-03 school year, Pearce began exploring how the school's 80 acres could be used as an educational resource. The idea of creating an outdoor classroom led to discussions with Maddus, who volunteered to take Archer's seventh-grade class on a field trip to the vernal pool.

"Many kids discovered that they had vernal pools right in their backyards," Archer said.

Orono is dotted with vernal pools, and, as the town continues to grow and develop, it's important to educate people about their value, the pupils explained Monday during their presentation.

"It's what we hope will be an ongoing study of the environment, the ecology of the school department land," Pearce said.

Orono Middle School Principal Robert Lucy also walked into the woods with the children to see the presentation.

"I am extremely pleased at this whole project," he said. "It's been a great partnership. This is real experiential learning."

The following information was compiled by Orono pupils and is included on the new sign at Lost Pond.

What is a vernal pool? A vernal pool is a seasonal wetland that dries up generally around late summer and is very wet during spring after the snowmelt.

Where do the amphibians go when the pools dry up? During the time when they are not using the breeding pools, the amphibians depend upon the surrounding woods for survival. The amphibians need areas of loosely compacted deep forest litter and patches of canopy for shade.

Why are vernal pools important? Many vernal pools are important breeding habitats for certain species of amphibians and invertebrates such as wood frogs, spotted and blue-spotted salamanders, four-toed salamanders, and fairy shrimp.

Why are vernal pools key ecological sites for certain species to breed? Because most vernal pools dry up during the summer, they maintain a fishless environment. The pools are ideal for amphibians to lay their eggs. Once the water evaporates, the adult amphibians will remain in the surrounding woods until the following spring.

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