

Ecology Camp Encourages Children to Learn About Conservation by Experiencing the Outdoors

Contributed by Michelle Edwards and Mitchell Diggs
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OXFORD, Miss. — Environmental stewardship is always on the schedule at the University of Mississippi Field Station, but the subject has a healthy dash of youthful enthusiasm this summer.

About 100 children, ranging from grades 2 through 7, are participating in five weeklong sessions of Ecology Day Camp. The camp, sponsored by the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality and the Field Station, began earlier this month and runs through July 10.

The varied habitats of the Field Station provide the perfect setting for students to experience nature. Only 11 miles from Oxford, the station is a preserve of more than 700 acres where the kids can “mingle” with the natural world. Used primarily for various scientific studies, the Field Station maintains pristine conditions, making it a great place to learn for people of all ages, from elementary to college and beyond.

Hollin Webb (front) and Will Chambers learn how water is purified at the campus wastewater treatment plant. UM photo by Michelle Edwards.

“Ecology Day Camp is very popular among students and parents,” said Ray Highsmith, Field Station director. “We have many repeat campers from previous years. Due to this success, we recently expanded the program to five weeks so more children could learn by doing — a lifelong process.”

During this summer's sessions, the campers learn about the importance of conservation and environmental stewardship. Mike Wallace, science teacher at Oxford Elementary School and Ecology Day Camp director, designed the program to be hands-on, so the kids spend a lot of time outdoors learning about a variety of subjects, from tree and bug identification to the importance of wetlands and endangered species.

Wallace keeps things interesting for the kids and mixes up time at the field station with field trips throughout the week and a cook-out with parents on Thursday evenings.

On Tuesday mornings, the class goes to the Ole Miss campus for a tour of the wastewater treatment facility. David Adkisson, plant supervisor, shows the campers around the grounds and explains the process of cleaning the water.

“In our county, we take the availability of clean water for granted,” Adkisson said. “I want the kids to learn how important it is to have water and to keep the supply clean.”

All day Friday is devoted to a field trip to the Frankstown Cretaceous Fossil Park on Twenty Mile Creek between Baldwyn and Booneville to collect fossilized shark teeth and oyster shells from a creek bed. The day includes a picnic on the bank overlooking the creek.

The fossil hunt was the highlight of the week for Will Chambers, a rising fourth-grader at Oxford's Della Davidson Elementary School.

"We got to learn a little bit about erosion before we went down into the creek to hunt for sharks' teeth," Chamber said. "They shoveled the sand into colanders for us to seine and look for the sharks' teeth. If you got tired of that, you could just play in the creek, which is what I did after I found, like, five sharks' teeth."

Chambers also enjoyed learning about insects and visiting the water treatment plant, and said he would definitely recommend Ecology Camp to his friends.

The Field Station is located in the Bay Springs area of Lafayette County at 15 County Road 2078. Its mission is to foster ecosystem stewardship by providing a natural laboratory and infrastructure for research, education and service, and by cultivating scientific information and understanding of upland watersheds in the lower Mississippi River Basin and similar habitats.

For more information on the Field Stations and its educational and research programs, go to <http://baysprings.olemiss.edu> .