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Educators visit Thousand Islands Biological Station in Clayton

By JAEGUN LEE
TIMES STAFF WRITER
FRIDAY, JULY 12, 2013



NEW YORK SEA GRANT
Teachers aboard the research vessel Peter L. Wise Lake Guardian collect water samples from Lake Ontario as part of a weeklong workshop to develop new and engaging classroom activities for students.

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- Educators visit Thousand Islands Biological Station in Clayton



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CLAYTON — A multistate group of educators on a voyage aboard a federal research vessel got hands-on experience Wednesday with the aquatic life of the St. Lawrence River.

ARTICLE OPTIONS

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These 15 teachers and environmental educators — from New York, Minnesota, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio and Pennsylvania — have been cruising Lake Ontario clockwise from Youngstown since Sunday to study marine ecology as part of a Shipboard and Shoreline Science workshop for teachers.

Their mission aboard the Peter L. Wise Lake Guardian — a 180-foot U.S. Environmental Protection Agency research vessel — is simple: craft an engaging classroom curriculum by working with real scientists in the field all day for a week.

“We want them to see what research is really like and include real science in classrooms,” said Helen Domske, a coastal education specialist with New York Sea Grant, who has been organizing the summer workshops that rotate among the five Great Lakes every five years.

On Wednesday morning, the educators met with researchers at the Thousand Islands Biological Station, who know a thing or two about the human impact on the ecology of the St. Lawrence River, which is part of the Great Lakes system.

Station Director John M. Farrell, a wildlife biologist at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, Syracuse, said that with the construction of the Robert H. Moses-Saunders Power Dam, Massena, and the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway shipping channel came foreign invasive species and human regulation of water levels, which led to the destruction of wetland habitats.

Everything is connected, and native species have been fighting an uphill battle against the foreign breeds introduced largely through the discharge of ballast water.

To maintain stability during transit, ocean vessels store water in their ballast tanks, sometimes bringing with it unwanted “hitchhikers” such as zebra mussels and round gobies.

Often, the introduction of such invasive species leads to a decline in biodiversity by choking out the native wildlife, negatively affecting an ecosystem’s biological health.

Round gobies, for example, are infamous for feeding on eggs, which is bad news for native species.

However, they also help keep the zebra mussel population under control.

Smallmouth bass, which are native to the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River region, have started feeding on round gobies. But because round gobies consume large amounts of zebra mussels — which are “filter species” that consume toxins — their introduction into the smallmouth bass’s diet means more toxins are traveling up the food chain.

The spread of invasive species and their impact on ecosystems are complex issues that could

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be hard to explain to pupils in elementary school.

But Colleen Warner, a fourth-grade teacher at Fairgrieve Elementary School, Fulton, said children are smarter than you'd think.

“That age is really when kids start to grasp abstract concepts,” she said. “It's a good age to get students thinking about social justice and ecology. That's when you plant the seeds by introducing different aspects of a complex issue.”

The educators were to continue to help researchers on board Lake Guardian by gathering water samples from the lake — to monitor pH levels, algae and plankton abundance and chemical composition — and they planned their next stop at Oswego.

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