

Creating the Opportunity

A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE
ON JOURNALING IN
NATURE

Scheduling eight 6th grade classes for the same program is no small feat, so when the weather turned sour for their fall nature journaling session, the Petoskey Middle

School teachers decided to go ahead with it anyway. The location was changed from Bay View Woods (a half mile walk from the school) to the field and wetlands just outside their classroom. One girl had shown up in high heeled sandals and it looked like she was going to have to stay inside. But she didn't want to miss this class so she ran to the gym, found some spare socks, and appeared outside a few minutes later. "I did not hear one complaint from the kids," said teacher Beth Lancaster, who coordinates the program with the Conservancy. "They would have been really disappointed if we hadn't gone."

This is Beth's fourth year participating in the 6th grade Nature Journaling program with Little Traverse Conservancy. Each year, the program has grown and evolved and this year, every 6th grader in their school is participating. It is a commitment made at the beginning of the year when each student purchases a spiral bound journal. Throughout the course of the school year, they plan three seasonal visits to the woods. In the fall, they pick their favorite "spot" and plan to return to that spot each season. Prior to each trip, a Conservancy educator comes to the classroom to introduce different journaling techniques and prepare them for their visit.

"We do lots of creative writing in many different forms and their writing is accompanied with sketches," Beth explains. Last November, the same week her class did their field session, Beth invited local artist Catherine Carey into the class. Catherine taught the students how to do quick journal sketches in the field so they could elaborate on them later back in school. "You could have heard a pin drop while she was teaching them," Beth said. "When she was done, they actually applauded."

Beth believes Nature Journaling is a perfect match for Petoskey's sixth grade curriculum and she is easily able to combine both science and art to introduce more sophisticated topics such as "subnivean layers" and "phenology." Each time they start a new session, the students are asked to record that day's physical data: time of sunset and sunrise, temperature, moon phase, and wind speed. But the academic learning is just one of the many benefits she is seeing. Some kids who struggle in the classroom find their thoughts are freed up once they are sitting alone in the woods. "We don't grade the journals," Beth explains. "I tell the kids that you each have a unique perspective on where you are today and how you interact with the world. The journal is yours and nobody else's...I just need to see that you've completed the assignment."

When asked what she thinks is the biggest obstacle families face today that prevents them from connecting with nature, she guesses that it is our busy schedules. "Sixth graders are so excited to learn about nature. It is just up to us to take the time to provide the opportunities," she said.

"Beth has played a critical part in streamlining our program to fit the requirements of daily life in a middle school," said Conservancy Education Specialist Alison Berry. "As non-formal educators working alongside traditional educators, we realize the intensity of the average classroom. Beth has helped us make this program both more teacher and kid-friendly."

Last October, Beth joined Conservancy education staff at a conference in Wisconsin where they were able to hear Richard Louv, founder of the "No Child Left Inside" movement speak. One of the main themes repeated at the conference was that if we want children today to take care of nature, we have to teach them to value it. "And I heard the neatest thing about EcoJournaling while in Wisconsin," Beth said. "It was 'If you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are. EcoJournaling helps the kids know who they are.'" 

