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City kids get taste of forestry

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BLUE RIVER - How often does a centipede about as long as your index finger upstage a 400-year-old Douglas fir soaring hundreds of feet above the forest floor?

Most who come to see the old growth stands at the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest look up, site director John Cissel said.



Lakeisha Harris, 13, takes a core sample from a Western hemlock to determine its age with other middle school students from Portland who visited the H. J. Andrews Experimental Forest near Blue River. At left is H. J. Andrews site director John Cissel.

But there's no predicting what will capture the attention of middle-schoolers. One minute, it's trees so tall they defy description, the next it's bugs in the dirt.

"Ooh, what is that?"

"It's a caterpillar!" ... "It's a millipede!" ... "It's the colors of the OSU Beaver!"

"It's actually a centipede," Cissel said, shifting gears as quickly as the students he was guiding through the forest. "Anybody know what a keystone species is?"

Turns out the little guy inching through the duff plays a major part in the nutrient cycle of the forest, consuming bits of decaying wood and excreting them in a form that still smaller critters can consume.



Dustin Thurman, 13, uses calipers to measure woody debris as the students gather data along Lookout Creek. The Portland students learned about various research projects in the Andrews forest.

In the experimental forest, researchers track the role of the biggest trees to the tiniest mites. Each summer, their work draws students from Portland's Inner City Youth Institute, who descend on the Andrews for two days to learn about forests and the people who make their living studying them.

The program is sponsored by the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management and Oregon State University with the twofold goal of exposing Portland kids to the outdoors and getting minority youths interested in science. It's also a long-term strategy toward diversifying the work force in the nation's natural resources agencies.

Photos: **BRIAN DAVIES** / The Register-Guard

"We want to expose kids to a beautiful forest, and we want to expose them to research projects so that if they have an interest in science, they can see how they can get here from where they are," program director David Stemper said.

He couldn't have picked a better confluence of beauty and research. The Andrews Experimental Forest is 16,000 acres of stunning topography in the heart of the Willamette National Forest where steep forested slopes rise from Lookout Creek northeast of the Blue River Reservoir.

Set aside by the federal government in 1948 as a special place to study the forest and logging, the Andrews is run jointly by the Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Research Station, Oregon State University and the Willamette National Forest.

On the slopes rising from the creek, old growth Douglas firs, the tallest trees in the Pacific Northwest, create dappled groves that are also home to hemlock, vine maple, red cedar and alder. Shade-tolerant greenery beneath them - three-lobed oxalis, stiff-leaved Oregon grape, sweeping sword ferns and lanky rhododendron - make the groves a welcome oasis on a hot day.

The forest draws both national and international scientists following a wide range of environmental research.

The forest and the researchers who work there also welcome students from the elementary grades up through graduate school. Part of Andrews' mandate is to educate and help seed the next batch of scientists and researchers, Cissel said.

And that's how 22 middle-schoolers found themselves linked up with researchers at three different sites this week.

One group spent the afternoon with northern spotted owl field workers who spend their summer nights out in the forest hooting and listening for a hooted reply, part of long-term demographic study tracking the health of the species that relies on old growth habitat.

Another group waded into Lookout Creek to capture aquatic insects, part of ongoing biodiversity studies in the forest.

The third group tagged after Cissel along a trail through stands of massive Douglas firs.

They got quick lessons on why the biggest trees sometimes crash to the forest floor.

"Natural disasters?" one student speculated.

A windstorm, Cissel said, but no disaster. While the storm took out one tree, it opened up a hole in the canopy, allowing more sun on the forest floor that spurred new growth for other species.

They learned how researchers gauge the age of living trees by boring long thin holes and extracting a tiny tube of ringed wood.

"Do they get paid for that?" asked 14-year-old Kayla Davis.

"Sort of," answered OSU graduate student Kevin McGuire in reference to the minimal wages of student researchers.

The youngsters also got a taste of just how painstaking some forest research can be.

OSU graduate students Nicole Czornomski and Dave Dreher took them down to Lookout Creek and described their summer research project: walking the 8 1/2 miles of the creek-bed and recording every piece of wood in the stream bigger than 10 centimeters. It took them from June 24 to July 18 to count the 10,000 pieces of wood in the creek.

The work will help foresters better understand how wood is distributed through streams, which part of the forest it came from and how it benefits fish and other aquatic species.

But the trip wasn't all work and no play. After their tours, the youngsters gathered for the evening at a creekside campsite where scientific discussion gave way to the more typical middle-schooler pursuits of racing, shrieking, creek-wading and eating.

Laura Harris, 13, took a break from a dip in the water to talk about what had been a satisfying day in the woods.

"I just like trees," she said. "There's something peaceful about them. And green is my favorite color."

Harris, who starts ninth grade this year, said she has begun mulling her career options. "I either want to be a rock star or something in science. Maybe marine biology. But I liked what Nicole said about working in the woods."

That was music to Glen Westlund's ears.

A Forest Service district planner, he assists with the youth program every summer and is beginning to see its impact.

Of 22 students who went out on the first Inner City Youth-sponsored outing three years ago, eight are leaning toward natural resources careers, he said.

Program organizers work with science teachers in several Portland middle and high schools, identifying students likely to benefit from the exposure.

Dani Jackson, 16, a camp supervisor for the middle-schoolers on this year's trip, said earlier trips to the woods had piqued her interest in watersheds.

"The McKenzie River is my favorite," she said. A junior in high school this fall, the Portland resident still has some time to decide what she wants to do, but she's leaning toward studying hydrology at OSU.

"They have a lot of programs at Oregon State University to get you started on a career with the Forest Service," she said.

And even those not keen on the great outdoors were open to the possibilities. Bendrea Andrews, 14, who announced matter-of-factly that he "hated being here," warmed slightly to the program in the end.

The teen-ager has an ear for poetry, likes Maya Angelou and jots down his own verse - when camp counselors don't confiscate his flashlight in the middle of the night.

He dreams of being a music producer when he grows up but might consider another path, he said.

Before students came to the Andrews, they spent two days at OSU learning about the school's various natural resources programs and staying in the dorms. That part wasn't all bad, Andrews said.

"I could go there," he said. "I could study forestry."