Teachers Hone Their Sea Science Skills at “Seine the Sound” Day at Hammonasset

Peg Van Patten

“First, take lots of kids—then take other teachers in your school, and plenty of parent volunteers,” was the advice that organizers Donna Rand and Donna DuBaldo, a teacher and a science coordinator at East Hartford/Glastonbury Elementary Magnet School, had for their peers attending “Seine the Sound,” a Long Island Sound Mentor Teacher professional development workshop held on May 9 at Hammonasset Beach in Madison, Connecticut.

About 25 teachers enthusiastically pooled their best ideas, resources, and observations on how to best involve young students directly with shoreline nature, via field trips and hands-on classroom activities that lead to self-discoveries.

Challenged to collect as many crabs as possible in the course of a mere 10 minutes, teachers scrambled over the cobbles and slimy rocks with buckets, and emerged with 493 crabs, quite a catch! Teachers then practiced sorting the crabs by species, gender, size, and so on. Somewhat startling was the fact that all but one crab were the very small invasive species, the Asian shore crab, Hemigrapsus sanguineus. (The single lonely other was a Green Crab, Carcinus maenas, an earlier invader.) Not a single crab considered to be native to the region was spotted.

Alberto Mimo, Connecticut DEP educator extraordinaire, and DEP naturalist Russell Miller, weren’t surprised. Mimo suggested that the teachers try to anticipate all possible questions a student might pose while observing these crabs, for example: “Why is this crab foaming at the mouth?” Answer: “The crab is oxygenating itself.” He also encouraged explaining to students that intense handling by visitors can be quite stressful to aquatic animals.

“Imagine you are a crab looking for a comfortable home and then a kid comes along and takes you away, handles you under the sun, plays with you, then puts you back somewhere else,” he said.

One dilemma posed by this particular crab and other invasive organisms is what to teach children about controlling undesirable invasive species that may harm native ecology. Do you tell children that an animal is bad, must be eliminated, and advise them to kill it?

“I think that for young children (Grades 5-9), it is most important for them to develop a respect and appreciation for life, and to hone their observation skills,” Mimo said, adding “besides, you could never kill all of these crabs no matter how hard you tried. They’re just everywhere.” Everyone nodded in agreement. But it’s not all bad, he added, the silver lining in the cloud may be that blackfish and tautog (finfish) eat them. There is some possibility that the Asian shore crabs could be harvested and sold at bait shops, he suggested.

“Bring your class twice; once in the fall and once in the spring” was another piece of advice offered by the organizers. “That way they can observe and compare the dramatic changes that have occurred at the location in just a few months, and try to figure out why.”

Mimo later demonstrated his elocutory skills as ultimate storyteller by recounting the glacial geological formation of Long Island Sound to teachers as though he were discovering it while walking with a mysterious old man who tapped him on the shoulder one day. Listening to the tale, some felt transported à la Dickens’ Ghost of Christmas Past, to surreal fantasy scenes that were an icy version of a Lord of the Rings journey—and yet it was true natural history.

The workshop was part of a series of Long Island Sound Mentor Teacher professional development workshops coordinated by Diana Payne, Education Coordinator for Connecticut Sea Grant. A second session will happen on June 8 to accommodate overflow participants. The workshops are funded by a grant from the U.S. E.P.A. Long Island Sound Study.

Peg Van Patten edits Wrack Lines. She enjoyed attending the workshop as a guest.
“Seine the Sound”
Photo Gallery

What species is it?
Taxonomy practice

Sorting the crabs
...are we done yet?

photos by Diana Payne and Peg Van Patten