

## Conservation education develops young minds: [www.heraldtimesonline.com](http://www.heraldtimesonline.com)

By Carroll Ritter  
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This guest column was written by Carroll Ritter, environmental education coordinator for Sycamore Land Trust.

Equipping young people to be responsible adults can be rewarding but requires creative approaches. In the area of conservation ethics, we must instill a value system that creates a long-term sense of ownership. Given an educational setting incorporating the right mix of stimuli and concrete expectations, we can accomplish much.

Educational programs formulated by Sycamore Land Trust, soil and water conservation districts and the U.S. Forest Service have all targeted age groups from first grade through college. The activities are designed to be fun and also weave in science, math, art and writing skills.

The outdoor lab days sponsored by Sycamore Land Trust, Bartholomew County Soil and Water and Bloomington Parks and Recreation have maximized the exposure of hundreds of children to nature. Here, talented mixes of professionals volunteer their time to set up many activities that are fun, hands-on and educational. An obvious enthusiasm by the kids shows that we have met the goals.

Many Sycamore Land Trust activities are set up to yield project-based outcomes. Participants come away with data sets, skills and the benefits of hands-on learning. There is tremendous reinforcement of classroom learning by practical application. We have found this works in any grade level, especially with dynamic classroom teachers who are involved in the process.

Projects this year have included an ecological survey by Dinah Fuller's Eastern Greene Middle School students. Measurements and calculations were done along with collection of field data entered directly into a laptop computer. Another project was designed for Bloomington's New Tech High School. This was a watershed project on two segments of Bean Blossom Creek in Brown and Monroe counties. The ecology project that involved Bloomington High School South, IU's Research and Teaching Preserve and the land trust gathered data that can be used as baselines for future studies.

Whether environmental education programs are designed to reach large groups quickly, such as at the Tangeman Woods outdoor lab in Bartholomew County or Leonard Springs Nature Days in Bloomington, or whether they work with individual classes and teachers, the result is motivated students. It is hoped that the local schools see value in getting students out to enjoy our wonderful natural world.

Even when a teacher does his or her own project or designs a great field day for students, this instills a long-term value of stewardship into the young people of today. What children inherit from us must be that responsible ethic of caring-for others, for nature and for one's self.

Down to Earth welcomes reader submissions of no more than 400 words on topics of interest to the local environmental community. Submissions will be edited for grammar, spelling, punctuation, clarity, length and good taste. Authors must provide first and last names, as well as relevant affiliations. Submission is no guarantee of publication. Send contributions to [dte@heraldt.com](mailto:dte@heraldt.com).

Courtesy photo  
Sixth-grade students learn about fossils at Leonard Springs Nature Days in September 2009.

