

Nature is the perfect outdoor school lab: www.heraldtimesonline.com

By Carroll Ritter
Special to the Hoosier Times
6/3/2012

Schools are constantly increasing focus on core standards and ways to stimulate students to achieve those standards. Classroom instruction, while often superbly done by teachers, may be well supplemented by using “out-of-the-box” strategies, which are right outside the window. When doing science, math, and writing, what better place to go into real life application than out-of-doors?

Even better is powering up with extraordinary resource people from our very community — and on top of that to visit world-class research sites so close to us.

Sycamore Land Trust recently helped coordinate an outstanding field study with Bloomington High School South students and scientists from Indiana University’s geography department. The trip was to Morgan-Monroe State Forest, where IU has its AmeriFlux tower measuring carbon dioxide uptake and also has ground units measuring tree physiology and flow rates. (See HT article “Indiana’s forests help balance carbon,” Nov. 18, 2011).

Students on this trip were actively engaged in science measurements and understanding and interpreting data. IU professors Faiz Rahman, Danilo Dragoni and graduate students worked with teacher Amanda Figolah’s students to do the measurements with expensive scientific instruments. The outcome of this day provided students a much better understanding of atmospheric carbon, how our Indiana forests help the world, and how to become knowledgeable about worldwide climate changes.

Another great learning opportunity for elementary students occurs at Childs Elementary, where SLT educators power up with exceptional teachers Lisa Schlegel and Alex May. The school site provides great opportunities for outside exploration and very focused units in math and science. IU professor Meredith Park-Rogers worked with SLT and Childs to provide a practicum for her School of Education students teaching outdoor units in science. Educators Carroll Ritter and Mary Weeks also conducted activities for Mrs. Schlegel’s fifth-grade students using trees to finding circumference, diameter and radius, as well as understanding how to measure slopes on steep hillsides and how this affects land use.

All of these learning opportunities meet several objectives: reinforcing classroom concepts, immersion in the natural world, caring for the planet, and becoming knowledgeable, responsible citizens who can make good decisions. Yes, nature is our ultimate “lab.”

Carroll Ritter is environmental education coordinator of Sycamore Land Trust.

Indiana University graduate student Tyler Roman, left, works on the forest carbon study in Morgan-Monroe State Forest with a Bloomington High School South student. He had help from students at Bloomington South as well as scientists from Indiana University's geography department.
Carroll Ritter | Courtesy photo

