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NASHVILLE, INDIANA • ONE DOLLAR

An education partnership: Helmsburg, Sycamore Land Trust

Helmsburg Elementary students, from left, Willow Johnson, Caleigh Allendar, Alex Stewart, Gage James and Vince Tom analyze a soil sample for stratification.

Courtesy of Brenda Ely

"Are we going to go outside today?"

This question was enthusiastically asked by each third- and fourth-grade group I met as a guest in Brenda Ely's science class at Helmsburg Elementary School.

Mrs. Ely let them know that I'd be there. These students were excited about learning. They were excited about going outside.

"I think it is so important for kids to be outside. We live in one of the most beautiful places on earth. I want our kids to understand how lucky they are to live in a place like Brown County and to not take it for granted," Ely said.

SHANE GIBSON GUEST COLUMNIST

Research has increasingly shown that experiences in nature have many benefits.

Several studies indicate that children who have daily exposure to natural settings experience improvements on measures of physical activity, academic performance, cognitive abilities, attention deficit disorder and stress levels.

Sycamore Land Trust's Environmental Education Program has partnered with Ely to support and enhance the learning experience for Helmsburg students.

Soil was our topic on the unseasonably warm day in early December. We discussed a soil profile and the different "soil horizons," from the organic layer to the bedrock or parent material. The students had been studying soil and shared their knowledge of the different soil particles (sand, silt, and clay) and of loams.

Together, we gathered leaves in different stages of decay to create a timeline of least decomposed to the most decomposed.

Students made connections back to the soil horizons and that the organic layer is mostly made of dead or dying organisms. The students then took

(See **TRUST,** page B6)

TRUST

(Continued from page B1)

soil samples from the school yard.

Back in the classroom, the soil was placed in a jar of water and shaken vigorously. While we watched the mixtures settle, we discussed the different visible layers. Students could see that the larger particles (sand and rock) had settled to the bottom, while suspended particles kept the upper layer of water cloudy.

Comparing the size of the different layers, we could get a rough idea if the sample was a sandy loam, a silty-clay loam, and so forth.

Ely added, "I believe that programs and projects like this one is how we can get kids excited and interested in being outside again. The more we can work together and share our expertise, passions and hobbies with our children the better off we will all be. This is how to truly engage kids and get them excited to be outside and learning about the natural world."

Not only is being outdoors beneficial, studies also show that a specific strain of bacterium in soil, Mycobacterium vaccae, is healthy, too.

Researchers Dorothy Matthews and Susan Jenks from The Sage Colleges in Troy, New York said, "From our study we can say that it is definitely good to be outdoors — it's good to have contact with these organisms. It is interesting to speculate that creating learning environments in schools that include time in the outdoors where M. vaccae is present may decrease anxiety and improve the ability to learn new tasks."

Sycamore Land Trust views its mission more broadly than simply protecting natural land for wildlife, and thus invests in the region's future through its Environmental Education Program.

Sycamore Land Trust believes that building an appreciation for nature is critical to our mission of protecting land and to creating a healthier Hoosier landscape. By providing environmental education to people of all ages and abilities, we increase the number who understand the value of nature and are therefore more likely to take steps to protect it.

In the past nine months, over 1,700 people have participated in Sycamore education programs.

Sycamore partnerships like the one with Helmsburg Elementary are crucial for this mission. Ely summarized, "The more they (students) experience nature and the things in it, the more they will learn to appreciate what we have, and the more it fosters a sense of responsibility to take care of our earth and help preserve it."

To schedule an environmental education program for your group, contact Shane Gibson at shane@sycamorelandtrust.org.

To view our public programs, visit sycamorelandtrust.org and click on "Events."

For volunteer opportunities, contact jaime@sycamorelandtrust.org.

Shane Gibson is the environmental education director for Sycamore Land Trust. He can be reached at shane@sycamorelandtrust.org.

Area environmental education events

Jan. 9: Healthy Hike in a Winter Wonderland, Trevlac Bluffs Nature Preserve, Brown County, all ages

Jan. 23: Lil' Hikers: Winter Games, Touch the Earth Natural Area, Bartholomew County, geared for children up to 12

March 5: Lil' Hikers: Making Maple Syrup, Cedar Crest-Sycamore Office, Monroe County, geared for children up to 12

March 8: Weekday Walkers, Backyard Sugarin' (maple syrup), private property in northeast Monroe County near Lake Lemon, all ages

May 25: Weekday Walkers, Spring Forest Hike, Laura Hare Nature Preserve at Downey Hill, Brown County, all ages

July 14: Weekday Walkers, Explore a Conservation Easement, Yellowwood Farm, Brown County, all ages

To register, contact Jaime at (812) 336-5382 ext. 100, or register at sycamorelandtrust.org by clicking on "events" then "register here."

Monthly "Preserve a Preserve" volunteer opportunities will be available soon.