



SYCAMORE LAND TRUST

Media Coverage

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Sycamore educator combines nature and storybooks



Shane Gibson, environmental education director with Sycamore Land Trust, bases a lesson around a picture book called “Plant a Pocket of Prairie” for students at Marlin Elementary in Bloomington, Ind. Thursday, March 21, 2019. (Brittani Howell/The Herald-Times)

As Shane Gibson read “Plant a Pocket of Prairie” to Marlin Elementary students, he stopped to remind them that the plants mentioned in the book were the same ones students were planting later that day.

Plants including butterfly weed, a variety of milkweed and purple and yellow coneflowers.

“Plant cup plants,” he read from the book by Phyllis Root. “A thirsty chickadee might come to drink from a tiny leaf pool.”

“Chickadee!” the kids whispered to themselves. “Chickadee!”

The book, which describes different kinds of plants and wildlife native to the Great Plains states, encourages readers to restore little patches of habitat, or “pockets of prairie.” That kind of message is directly compatible with Gibson’s job: taking outdoor education into classrooms throughout Monroe County and beyond.

Picture books find their way into many of Gibson’s classroom visits. He was initially trained as an elementary school teacher, and always enjoyed finding good books to use in his classroom. As someone who has always loved the outdoors and environmental science, he gravitated toward books that touched on those subjects.

At the time, it was a way for him to bring the outdoors into his classroom. Now, it’s a way to infuse his outdoor education with classroom elements.

Many of Gibson’s lessons are hands-on and active: planting seeds, playing a “predator or prey” tag game, going on a hike. Those hands-on lessons reinforce the lessons students are learning about growth cycles or food chains. A story in a book can do the same thing, supporting or introducing a classroom concept through different means.

Gibson points to Anne Mazer’s “The Salamander Room.” In the story, a little boy finds a salamander in the woods and tries to create a home for it in his house. Before he knows it, he has changed his whole bedroom into a forest with all the elements necessary to keep a salamander healthy and happy — in short, all the elements of a habitat.

“We could introduce the topic of habitats by just having a discussion. Or we could read this book, and use the book to introduce it,” Gibson said. The lesson works in reverse, too: learning about habitats, and then reading the book. It’s all about getting students to think critically about the book, using what they have learned about habitats to understand or draw new meaning from the story.

Repeating the concepts in multiple ways is useful, too, Gibson said. “The more you do something, the better you understand it.” By doing a science lesson about habitats, then reading a book related to the science lesson, “We’re making connections in different ways.”

The lessons also help teachers who may be reluctant to embrace outdoor education ease into the practice. And occasionally, Sycamore Land Trust helps broaden their classroom libraries by donating sets of the books to the school Gibson visits.

Back in Jennifer Lewis' first-grade class at Marlin, Gibson looked up from "A Pocket of Prairie" to ask students questions about what they'd heard. What was a pocket of prairie, anyway? And what would happen if everyone planted one?

The students gave their best guesses. Before setting them loose to plant their own pockets, Gibson told them his understanding of the story: "If each of you planted a pocket the size of your desk, and we put all those desks together, and all the other classes plant pockets the size of desks and we put all those desks together, each of those little areas is a pocket.

"And if we put them all together — it makes something big."

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Bree Livingston and Eislee Porter plant their own pocket of prairie during a visit from Sycamore Land Trust's environmental education director, Shane Gibson, at Marlin Elementary in Bloomington, Ind. Thursday, March 21, 2019. (Brittani Howell/The Herald-Times)



Anitra Busby and Rylee Shields plant their own pocket of prairie during a visit from Sycamore Land Trust's environmental education director, Shane Gibson, at Marlin Elementary in Bloomington, Ind. Thursday, March 21, 2019. (Brittani Howell/The Herald-Times)