

Take Them Fishing!

By Theresa Stabo

Racks of fishing poles and stacks of teaching materials are in place. As Angler Education workshop participants trickle in, we start with a game of *FISHO!*. It's a bingo-style game of questions that helps set the tone and open participants to the idea that this kids' fishing program is about more than fishing. "Have you ever filled your waders?" "Have you ever stuck your finger with a fish hook?"

We quickly establish the notion that fishing helps to teach life's lessons on planning, safety, and overcoming loss (ever slammed your rod in the car door?). We also ask: "Have you ever watched a mayfly hatch or fallen asleep to the sound of a rushing river?" Having a positive connection to the natural world and keeping good company at the water's edge may help kids avoid more serious mistakes and harsher penalties, as well as help them organize their scattered thoughts.



The fact is, not all kids get the opportunity to experience nature in general, or fishing in particular. Children's schedules are packed, but let's look at what they're doing with their busy lives. In his book, *The Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Algonquin Books, 2005), Richard Louv addresses issues related to a generation of kids plugged into electronics but removed from the natural world. In a May 24, 2005 National Public Radio interview with Steve Inskeep, Louv stated that "Society is telling kids, unconsciously, that nature is past – it really doesn't count anymore, and the future is in electronics." He reminds us that biologically, we are still hardwired to have a "direct involvement with nature," but the prevalence of electronic entertainment has thrown our lives out of balance. Organized sports help to get kids outside, but the ball field is hardly a natural setting and parents are relegated to the roles of chauffeur and spectator. Fishing fosters family connections in ways that cheering from the sidelines cannot.

The Department of Natural Resources' Angler Education Program, in partnership with schools, helps to coax children back outside, beyond the manicured athletic field. We need to do this for several reasons. We need more eyes on the landscape to alert us to environmental problems. We need people to understand the connection between clean water and healthy fisheries that benefits all aquatic organisms. We need to cultivate the next generation of stewards who recognize good habitat when they see it and will commit

themselves to its long-term care through their daily actions and lifestyle decisions. This will take time and repeatable opportunities for youth to wet a line.

Schools of Fish

Louv also points to higher test scores among children exposed to a nature-based curriculum. Indeed, many classroom teachers have discovered that fishing opens new pathways to learning and helps kids strengthen their interest and grasp of concepts through the hands-on activities outlined in the Angler Education Program. Teachers skittish about heading to the water with sharp hooks flying around will find that much of the groundwork can be laid indoors in a more controlled setting. After some dry-land training (knot-tying in the classroom and casting practice on the school yard or gymnasium), teachers feel more confident about taking their anglers outdoors. Many Wisconsin schools are a short walk to fishable waters, so it's an opportunity not to be missed.

Math and Science – Knots and Guts

Knot-tying lessons are broadened to test knot strength during math class. Several trials are conducted and the data are recorded and graphed. Students determine through experimentation which knot is the strongest. Fish anatomy and Wisconsin fish species are learned using a dichotomous key and fish identification cards. When students catch fish during an outing they consult the key to make a positive identification. If it's a "keeper," internal fish organs and stomach contents are examined, prompting a discussion of the food chain. Notes about habitat conditions are recorded on data sheets or in journals for later analysis.

Wisconsin Fish Stories

Nothing stimulates the creative writing juices like the recollections of a fishing trip, even if it occurred a short distance from school. Many students keep fishing journals and use entries as the basis for poems or essays. The importance of historical journals to science and to our collective body of literature cannot be dismissed. Children can consider how their fishing journals may log present conditions to give the future a glimpse of the past. Badger history and civics come together in other lessons that highlight the prominence of water resources and fisheries in Wisconsin communities and our rights to enjoy them. Civics and science merge in a lesson about the use of coal-generated electricity and mercury contamination of fish. Students are asked, "How can you help to limit mercury in the food chain?"



Support, Funding and Scope

Angler Education is supported by the federal Sport Fish Restoration Program. Funding is generated by a federal excise tax on boating and fishing equipment. Teachers receive free training and classroom quantities of all materials. Junior Angler materials are geared for grades 4 – 8 and reinforce state academic standards across the curriculum. The Master Angler program for high school students is undergoing revision; other materials are available for grades K-3. Teachers have access to equipment at 42 tackle loaner sites around the state. Several schools offer the program as after-school and summer enrichment options, promoting fishing as a family activity by including a family fishing picnic in the program.

Ultimately, we want kids to have enough confidence in their fishing skills to invite a friend fishing during their free time. Not one to shun *appropriate* technology, Louv acknowledges the sometimes overblown stranger-danger concern with the suggestion to send kids afield with cell phones in hand, a solution any kid will endorse. I know mine did.



Hands-on, Fish-on! Training opportunities range from three hour in-services to five-day, one-credit courses. These teachers are aboard the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources research vessel, *Barney Devine* getting a first-hand introduction to the walleye population in Lake Michigan's Sturgeon Bay, during a one-credit course. The author is first on the left.

About the Author

Theresa Stabo has worked for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources since 1987 and has been director of the Aquatic Resources Education Program since 1993. She is a 1984 graduate of the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point. She and her husband live in Madison, Wisconsin with their two teenage sons, whom they see at mealtime. For information on teacher training opportunities, call 608/266-2272 or send an e-mail to Theresa.Stabo@dnr.state.wi.us or visit the Department of Natural Resources' Web site at dnr.wi.gov and click your way to *Fishing* then *Angler Education*.

Photo credits:

Kids and teachers fishing, Theresa Stabo

Author and teachers on research boat, Cathy Kornowski

Artwork: John Miller, Gray Jay Graphics

Note: This article first appeared in the January 2007 edition of the Wisconsin Association of Middle Level Education Journal.