

ENVIRONMENT

~ UVM Extension

Academy Fuels Teens' Interest in the Outdoors

Pawlet 4-H'er Tom Becker leaned over the side of the canoe and scooped up a water sample from Buck Lake in Woodbury.

With a water quality kit, he quickly analyzed the sample, jotting down some numbers before paddling off to collect additional data to assess the lake's health.

As a participant last July in the fourth annual Natural Resources Management Academy (NRMA), sponsored by UVM Extension and the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife, he learned about the environment and Vermont's natural resources, including its water ecosystems, and how to conduct fieldwork, all valuable for his future as a forester.

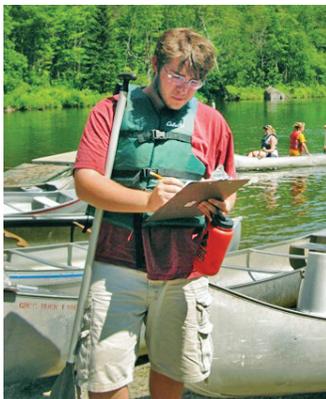
"I like being outdoors and first thought about a career in wildlife biology. But I wanted to get a feel for forestry and found the session on trees last year very interesting."

It also prompted the Rutland County homeschooler to enroll in forestry classes at Green Mountain College this year. He credits the academy with exposing him to different natural resources-related fields and opportunities.

He is not alone in his avid interest in the outdoors. This past summer 25 teens attended NRMA at the Green Mountain Conservation Camp at Buck Lake. Most hunt and fish. All explored nature and met others with similar interests.

NRMA was developed by 4-H educator Lauren Traister to provide quality environmental education for teens. And the concept is working. Evaluations from the most recent academy indicated that 88 percent of participants increased or greatly increased their understanding of issues related to natural resources management. About 72 percent increased or greatly increased their desire to pursue school or a career in the natural resources.

In 2011 NRMA offered workshops on bird identification, water quality, ecological planning and the science behind climate change. A canoe scavenger hunt taught compass and mapping skills while night fishing provided a chance to learn new techniques and study fish habitats. Although both the workshops and recreational



activities are what draw the kids to the program, according to Traister, NRMA's real value is connections.

"It connects kids to nature and new opportunities as well as to professionals in natural resources-related fields. Some kids line up internships or find a mentor for community projects."

"It's a great informal avenue for them to ask questions and get



Lisa Halvorsen

Amanda Varney, Fairfax (center) collects a water sample from Buck Lake with the help of Peter Davidson, Rutland, and Lyndsay Potter, Fletcher, during a lake assessment workshop at the fourth annual Natural Resources Management Academy.

advice from professionals at a time when many are starting to think about future career opportunities and education," adds Amber van Zuilen, camp coordinator, Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department.

Strong friendships also develop. "I have never seen kids bond as quickly as they do here," Traister says. "They share common interests, but it's more than that. They also listen and learn from their peers."

"We're all here to have fun and learn about nature. That's the common ground. The icebreaker," Bayli Bienvenue of Addison explains. "I'm still in touch with people I met last year from a couple of counties away. That's the kind of friendships that form here."

Traister notes, "NRMA reinforces what these kids already want to do. It provides the tools to further explore the natural world around them but also grows their self esteem and helps them along this critical journey to becoming adults."

For Peter Davidson of Rutland, who wants to be a forester, the weekend provided the opportunity to explore all aspects of the outdoors. "As a forester, there are lots of things to think about. You need to know about wildlife habitat and where not to log and about recreational uses of forests. I learned a lot last year and will definitely be back next year," he says.

Waitsfield teen Robert Danaher has attended every academy and also hopes to return next summer – this time as a counselor. "I enjoy knowing as much about nature as I can. The workshops are different every year and always useful. It's fun learning new things like bird watching and plant identification."

"UVM Extension (through 4-H) has found a great way to get youth connected with our natural resources through hands-on education that youth enjoy," van Zuilen concludes. "For some this is their first real immersion into our natural resources, whereas others come back year after year. Whether this is their first or fourth year, they take away more knowledge of our environment, personal growth and friendships."

~Lisa Halvorsen