

EDUCATION

Students explore Elkhorn Slough Reserve

Young minds are learning how to connect the dots between local watersheds and the ocean

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WATSONVILLE » For students at Watsonville’s Mount Madonna School, learning beyond the confines of the classroom is taken to a new level. On Thursday, students from fifth and ninth grade classes, 18 total, spent the day exploring Elkhorn Slough Reserve.

This hidden gem is the second-largest estuary in California, situated along the Pacific Coast of Monterey Bay. Founded in 1979, Elkhorn Slough offers oak forests, coastal prairie and tidal marsh for students young and old to explore.

“It’s a fun day outdoors at the slough, learning about all the life that lives there and how that, in

turn, is connected to the Monterey Bay,” said Jessica Cambell, project mentor and fifth-grade teacher at Mount Madonna School.

Both sets of young, eager minds, are also enrolled in a mentorship program that involves a ninth-grader being paired up with a fifth-grader for the school year. Throughout the day’s field trip, the pairs of students commingled to teach one another new things and reinforce concepts learned in the classroom.

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Ariel Hunter, from left, Community Outreach Coordinator at Elkhorn Slough Reserve, talks Thursday with Mount Madonna School students Sam Kaplan and Solomon Coleman.

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Students

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“The main purpose of this field trip is for fifth-grade students to gain a greater understanding of how our watershed works and all the inter-related pieces that affect our oceans,” said Cambell. Although these students don’t have a specific class dedicated to marine science, they do work on a year-long project that’s inspired by the ocean.

In the initial weeks of Cambell’s class, the students were asked to vote on a science-related topic to study throughout the year. The top three choices submitted were sea turtles, pesticides, and great white sharks, with the latter winning the ultimate majority.

“So many people are scared of sharks, but more people die from coconuts than sharks,” said Solomon

Coleman, a fifth-grader in Cambell’s class.

The students’ science curriculum focuses on the endangered sharks throughout the year too — from writing letters to legislators about the shark fin trade to pitching ideas to local businesses about reducing plastic consumption. During the recent field trip to Elkhorn Slough, the students were constantly challenged to think through how the water in this salt marsh affects great white sharks.

“It’s a tough question,” Coleman said.

“If you pollute the water here in the slough, it will go out into the ocean and eventually hurt the shark’s environment too,” said Vaden Barr, also a fifth-grade student at Mount Madonna School.

“Whatever happens on land affects the slough and the slough feeds into the ocean,” Cambell said. “Pollutants and other run-off,

such as plastics, enter from the watershed, affecting life in the slough and eventually, sharks in the bay.”

The day brings new adventures and excitement for the ninth grade students as well. “We are studying marine ecosystems,” said Nicole Silva, the marine biology teacher accompanying the ninth grade students. In this year-long course, students learn about all of the ocean’s ecosystems, from deep sea, to mangroves, and marshlands like Elkhorn Slough, she explained.

“Being able to visit Elkhorn Slough and use their microscopes to look at the phytoplankton and zooplankton and also do the water quality lab testing gives our students real hands-on knowledge of what we have been studying and why it is important,” Silva said.

At the end of this year, her students will attend a five-day field trip to Cata-

lina Island. Sam Kaplan, a ninth-grade student in Silva’s class, is very excited about the opportunity to snorkel and continue learning about marine science.

Throughout the day, ninth-graders such as Kaplan and Coleman worked together throughout the day to accomplish all sorts of activities designed to help the students connect the dots between the water at the slough and the greater marine environment of Monterey Bay. Some of the activities, like water diagnostic sampling and food web design, were more geared to the younger minds, while others, like analyzing water samples under a microscope, engaged the older students.

“We’ve been researching different environments in class. Sloughs are birthing grounds for the ocean, and this place just radiates life. It’s so cool to see,” Kaplan said.