

[From Summer 2000]

Environmental Education Planting a Seed for the Future

As the weather continues to warm, flowers bloom, and birds begin their migration to points north, another group prepares to arrive at the Refuge. Spring is the time of year when hundreds of area school children make their way to the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge for lessons about nature in the best classroom of all - the outdoors! For students of all ages, participating in an environmental education program on the refuge is an opportunity to learn appreciation of the wonders of nature and gain an understanding of how things work.

The environmental education program on the Refuge provides school children with hands-on activities designed to enhance their classroom learning. What better way to learn about a salt marsh than to be immersed in the smell of marsh mud, listen to the wind blowing through the cordgrass, and watch an egret stalking its prey along the edge of a tidal creek? Or uncover the habits of a deer by following its tracks as they wander along the edge of a pond or through the field. Experiments, role-playing, and exploration activities help students discover different habitats, learn how animals live, find out about the importance of plants, and begin to understand the role humans play in the environment. With every experience, the refuge staff tries to provide students with a positive outdoor experience, one that will stay with them for a lifetime.

Environmental education experiences here at the Refuge are about two hours long -- that's not much time to instill a deeper understanding of the environment or effect a change in the students' behavior. What we are doing is planting a seed, one that will hopefully be nurtured throughout a lifetime and grow into a strong sense of stewardship towards the Earth. Environmental education is the beginning of the process. If young children can begin to develop an appreciation of nature through positive outdoor experiences, that appreciation will lead to the need for a greater understanding of how things work, and with understanding comes the desire to take action to care for this fragile planet upon which we all depend.

How You Can Help

Providing quality environmental education experiences for children requires many hours of planning and preparation. Ensuring a safe learning environment, creating teaching aids, researching activities, and gathering materials all take time and require resources. Hence, we are asking for your help. We are looking for donations of the following items to use with our education program:

old magazines (*Ranger Rick*, *National Wildlife*, *Big Backyard*, *Audubon* or others of nature-oriented topics)

scrap matte board (used for writing boards and other teaching props)

film canisters used binoculars (in usable condition)

clean cheese jars (good for bug catching)

white enamel pans or plastic trays (good for holding aquatic animals)

empty toilet paper and towel tubes

clean egg cartons

carpet squares (remnants cut into 2ft squares, used for sit-upons outdoors)

crayons - skinny and fat

Golden Guide field guides - pond life, insects, non-flowering plants, spiders, trees, birds

If you have something you'd like to donate, contact the Refuge at 757-331-2760, or bring the item by the Visitor Center or Refuge Office, any day between 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. Thanks for your help!

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