

Students release steelhead fry into Whychus Creek

By Erin Borla
Correspondent

Students at Sisters Elementary School have been learning about river ecology through unique hands-on opportunities these past few months. Last Thursday steelhead fry, which were grown and hatched from eggs in the kindergarten classrooms and Ms. Few's second-grade class, were released by young students into Whychus Creek just blocks from the school.

Working with the Upper Deschutes Watershed Council and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, the kindergarten team consisting of three teachers developed curriculum for their young students. The Stream Stewards storyline consists of learning about nature, the life-cycle of fish and Whychus Creek, habitat, and soon, weather. It will all culminate with the kindergarteners' field trip to the Metolius River and Wizard Falls Fish Hatchery in the spring.

Through tanks in the classrooms the 5- and 6-year-olds also watched as the fish eggs transformed into small fry right before their eyes.

"The students formed a relationship with the eggs," said Stephanie Burke, a kindergarten teacher at Sisters Elementary School. "Every day they would come in and immediately go to the tank to see what had happened. They

wanted to know why some of the fish were living and some were dying. We talked about how water temperature and how things like pH levels can affect them. It's hard to describe pH levels — especially to a kindergartner."

This lesson led to many other classroom discussions and hands-on learning activities, all developed for some of Sisters' youngest residents to understand. They learned about conservation and changes in the watershed as they relate to the creek. Teachers talked about how organizations came together to support the creek in various ways and why Whychus Creek is important to our community. The story continued with the Deschutes Land Trust sending DVDs to the classrooms about the removal of the Whychus Creek Dam and the redirection of the creek.

Creek conservation became a great topic throughout class discussions. Students and teachers talked about the difference between living and non-living things in the watershed and how each has an important role to play.

"We talked about trash and how litter ends up in our watersheds," said kindergarten teacher Sara Elliott. "Shortly after that a student ran up to me on the playground with three pieces

of garbage and he said 'I don't want these to end up in Whychus Creek, so I picked them up.'"

Students created their own version of Whychus Creek in the kindergarten hallways with an artistic frieze. The storyline showcased a portion of the creek decorated by each class with boulders, plants, fish eggs, smolt, larger fish and other riparian features.

“ I'll be looking for my fish when it comes back up the creek. — Kindergarten student

"The students have been to the creek 2-3 times as a part of class this school year, depending on their classroom teacher," says Elliott. "We came out in November for a dry riparian planting of pine trees; then again a few weeks back to discuss habitat, and Thursday for the fish release."

Students created observation journals where they could record their findings and use it as a writing lesson. After spring break the teacher's weather unit will tie into where Whychus Creek begins and how the snow-melt can affect the creek's waterflow throughout the spring and summer.



PHOTO BY ERIN BORLA

Kindergartners release fish fry into Whychus Creek near their school.

Last Thursday, close to 60 students stood on the banks of Whychus Creek and listened to Miss Elliott. When she asked them to crouch down like steelhead eggs, they did — they slowly hatched and became fry. She asked about where the fish go and what they need to survive. She asked questions about the creek as well.

"Where does Whychus Creek begin?" Elliott asked.

"In the mountains! At Broken Top," all the students shouted back.

The students agreed their favorite part of the project was releasing the fish into the creek.

"The bond and relationship they developed (with the fish eggs), even after a few short weeks, was very strong," Burke said. "Several students were sad they no longer had fish to take care of in the classroom — they'd lost their pets."

Elliott remembers one student saying, "I'll be looking for my fish when it comes back up the creek."

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Holy Thursday, March 24:
Mass of the Lord's Supper, 7:00 p.m.

Good Friday, March 25: Stations of the Cross, 3:00 p.m.
Celebration of the Lord's Passion, 7:00 p.m.

Holy Saturday, March 26: Easter Vigil, 8:30 p.m.

Easter Sunday, March 27: Mass 10:00 a.m.

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