

Have you seen the big, green science machine traveling around the Rogue Valley?

Pacifica's "Caterpillar"—A mobile science and nature center

BY LINDA MULLENS

The "Caterpillar" is a unique mobile science and nature center within a 32' RV. We have been taking environmental science to local elementary schools and events for eight years now, involving up to 7,000 kids a year. Our programs provide students with hands-on activities and supporting displays linked to our curriculum. Through science-based inquiry, these programs foster the joy of learning about science and nature. Our new trailer in 2007 has brought much needed additional room and climate control (heating and air!). The Caterpillar is Pacifica's educational outreach program. Pacifica, A Garden in the Siskiyous, is a nonprofit with 420 acres off Watergap Road near Williams.

School Programs: The science trailer visits schools each year with a new theme. The state-benchmarked curriculum has been developed to provide programs of slightly different content and length (from 45 to 75 minutes) for different age children. After an introduction (often involving a story, puppet or game), students rotate among stations, each with a hands-on activity related to the current theme. Students in second through



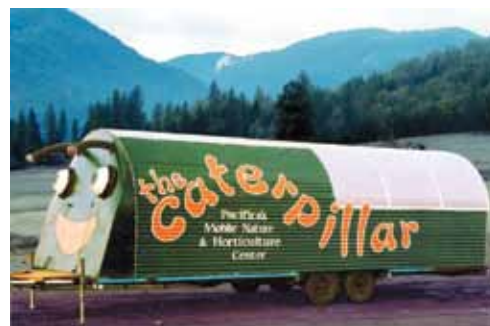
Photos clockwise from above:

—Facilitator Vanessa Martinez helps students use circuit boards to learn about reduce-reuse-recycle.

—The Caterpillar's recent visit to Ft. Vannoy Elementary

—Fondly remembered, Caterpillar I was used the first six years.

—Hayward Webster shares a game using "carbon molecules."



Schools contribute \$135 (Josephine County) and \$160 (Jackson County) per day for a school visit (our total cost is approximately \$375 per day). We can visit four to five classes a day—that's only \$35-40 per class! School contributions are approximately 1/3 of our operating costs; grants and donations are instrumental in funding our programs. Unfortunately this year, reduced grant funding only provided programs for half of the school days we usually present.

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fifth grades each receive a journal with activity sheets to reinforce learning. Past themes have included "Cycles," "Rock 'n' Roots," "Night and Day," "Adaptations," "Riddles in Biodiversity," "The Wonders of Water," "Invisible Waves" and "Land of Y" (Scientific Experimentation).

"I Can, Toucan, We All Can: Help Our Changing World!" is this year's science theme. Our timely program emphasizes a child's role in helping our world change in a positive way. Children learn about alternatives to fossil fuels through solar models and experiments with wind turbines. Using circuit boards and a recycling game, children gain insight into reducing, recycling and reusing. Through role-playing children come to understand the concept of carbon cycle and global warming and the value of planting your own food. Older students prepare a short narrative about an endangered animal including its global location, habitat, and reason for being endangered. Students learn what they can do to help these species. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have provided samples of animal pelts, tusks, and products from poached endangered animals.

In addition to our school presentations, the Caterpillar has been involved in local events this spring: Earth Day in Ashland and Master Gardeners at the Josephine County Fair Grounds. The Caterpillar recently held a field trip for 72 second graders at Pacifica for a day of fish printing, life cycle stories, the

Forest Service Salmon Tent, and a Talk About Trees program. On May 28 the Caterpillar was at the Watershed Education Symposium held in Medford. June 13 was Frog O' Faire at Riverside Park in Grants Pass. We are currently planning for our summer day camp session.

Last year the Caterpillar visited 15 Josephine County schools and 13 Jackson County schools. The Caterpillar routinely receives exceptional teacher evaluations:

"The Caterpillar is an outstanding program with lots of appropriate hands-on activities. My children love it and talk about it all day. They really remember what they saw, heard, and did." —Suzie Streckler, Madrona Elementary grade K

"This was awesome and fit in perfectly to what we've been learning." —Debbie Yerby, Applegate Elementary grades three and four

We provide schools with changing displays and equipment that might not otherwise be available. We hope we are inspiring excitement about science and helping children to learn about our natural world. But most important are the smiles on the kids' faces when they "get-it!" Smiles and waves as the "Caterpillar" travels through the area attest to its popularity. We are becoming a highly-visible, mobile "billboard" saying loud and clear "science and nature are fun AND important."

See CATERPILLAR, page 13



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