

# Coastal Life

Story by DAVID CAMPICHE • Photos by DWIGHT CASWELL

## A CLASS FOR THE AGES

Willapa National Wildlife Refuge will teach local fourth graders about Pacific County's natural environment and ways to help it heal and flourish

The challenge is simple enough to explain: Changes to the planet will evolve through our children, and then, through theirs. Changes happen naturally through evolution, intentionally through education. Throw into the mix a sprinkling of Tinkerbell pride and knowledge, and then we might be looking at a green revolution. A planet healed and healthy — we all wish for this. At the Willapa National Wildlife Refuge, environmental education is a key factor toward this enlightenment.

This year, on May 19, 20 and 22, refuge staff and local volunteers will administer a three-stage environmental program to the fourth grade students of Pacific County and its several school districts. Lauren Goodmiller is the environmental education coordinator for the refuge. She has a smile and enthusiasm to melt ice. She is looking for more volunteers.

I met with a half-dozen of these volunteers at the Willapa Refuge Headquarters on the Naselle River. After hugs and handshakes, Goodmiller and the volunteers laid out the elements of their program, the one that will be shared with the fourth graders.

The volunteers will make presentations at three stations, titled: forest, fresh water, and estuary (salt and brackish water). Each of the students will stop at each station for 10 minutes. Beyond watching and learning, the exchange is a two-way street. As Rose Power, a peninsula resident and weaver explains, "We teach the kids, and the kids teach each other. Along the way, the kids teach us." In other words, all is one happy family of environmentally conscious human beings, both

young and old.

"Bottom line," says James Lev, of north county, "is instilling a vested interest in the rivers and bay that inundate Pacific County." Those rivers run through forests. Tumble down granite-faced gorges, make riversong until, ultimately, they reach the ocean. Not such a long journey, but one that invests richly in our future.

In one demo, the volunteers, aided with the presence of a rough-skinned newt, demonstrated how the small creature always sought out the natural environment of lichen, ferns and moss over an alternative landscape of dried and arid needles, twigs and dirt. The highly toxic newt — don't swallow one — instinctively knew its comfort level. In slow plodding steps, it moved, every time, toward protection and shelter.

In another demo, the disposition of a clear flowing river was compared to a damaged stream. While studying the use of improper culverts — or where there was rampant destruction of the riparian zones that parallel the rivers — one clearly could see the breakdown of the natural environment that supports the wide inundation of salmon, steelhead, trout and dozens of local critters.

The kids will watch and learn: Tiny larvae of fresh water mussels (western Pearlshell) attach themselves to the mature salmon. Through that evolution, vital nutrition is distributed up and down river.

The impact of warmer water on the cultivation of oysters will also be a topic of discussion. So will be the consequences of acidification in Willapa Bay. All these elements knit together in a dramatic



Kathy Freitas holds a newt during a Willapa National Wildlife Refuge environmental education demonstration practice.



Rose Power and John Epler practice the demonstration they'll give to Pacific County fourth graders later this month about the increasing salinity of Willapa Bay.



Lauren Goodmiller, environmental education coordinator for Willapa National Wildlife Refuge, is seeking more local adult volunteers to help with an environmental education program with fourth grade students at the refuge.

web that supports the health of our rivers, bays and forests, and that is the root of these lessons.

These are just a few of the sessions to be shared with the grade school students in mid-May. Beginning of May 19, students will gather on Tarlatt Slough near the PUD station on Sandridge Road. Tarlatt Slough runs off the Willapa and ends its meandering course in the ocean at the end of Holman Road in Seaview. The stream was a pipeline for the Chinook Nation for hundreds of years. It might be said that today, Tarlatt Slough is a pipeline for our children, for their growth and illumination.

Willapa Bay is the cleanest estuary in the 48 contiguous states. It grows 20 percent of country's consumed oysters.

The oyster growers guard this body of water with ferocious determination. Aided by the dedication of the Willapa wildlife managers and their devoted staff, and with the added stimulus of acquired knowledge from our children, this lovely bay and its resources can grow and prosper. As these kids become empowered players in the battle for new world survival, they learn that our planet could still become a verdant and rich ecological haven for future generations. It could become, in the eyes of these volunteers and Goodmiller, a fait accompli.

### Help volunteer

This May, the Willapa National Wildlife Refuge needs your support

Call 360-484-3482

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