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Ecosystem explained in river trip

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Students learn about water, conservation

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Spending time on a wood canoe on the Kankakee River on a sunny, mild day isn't a bad way to learn about river ecosystems and the river's history.

This week, almost 800 students from area schools got the chance to do just that. Kankakee River Days, held at Dunn's Bridge County Park southeast of Kouts, was undertaken by the LaPorte County Soil and Water Conservation District through a grant by the Kankakee River Basin Commission.

"I like that I got to sit with my friends and be with a lot of people in a boat," said Lilli Houts, 13, a seventh-grader at Kouts Middle School, adding she also enjoyed learning about the many types of fish in the river.

A similar program has been going on for the past four years on Trail Creek in Michigan City, but not on the Kankakee, said Nicole Messacar, education coordinator for the conservation district.

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"This is the first time we're doing it here, so this is our inaugural Kankakee River event," she said, adding the Trail Creek effort has been "hugely successful."

The program will be held next week on Trail Creek with another 1,200 or so students, including scout groups, after-school programs and home-schooled students.

Other agencies helping with the program include the National Park Service, which is providing sessions on wetland ecology, the Northwest Indiana Paddlers Association, which is tackling water safety, and the Kankakee River Historical Society.

The students, in grades 2 through 12, go between four different stations and get to paddle their way up a section of the river on a 24-foot canoe that holds 10.

The program takes what Messacar called "a holistic approach," touching on a range of topics that have to do with the river. The river basin commission provided a \$25,000 grant, enough money to hold the program this year and next on the Kankakee.

The students suited up in life jackets and went through a few drills before they boarded the canoes, including one where they held a paddle, let go, then moved a spot to the left or right, grabbing the paddle of the person who's spot they took before the paddle fell.

Sharon VanKley, a sixth-grade science teacher at Kouts Middle School, helped chaperon the school's seventh-graders, most of whom she taught last year. The river program matches state standards for seventh-graders for water and ecology, and touches on what the kids learned last year.

"Last spring we talked a lot about watersheds and ecosystems," she said.

Alicia Ebaugh, a recycling and waste reduction educator with the LaPorte County Solid Waste District, had to do a quick lesson on the Kankakee River, since she usually helps out at Trail Creek.

Making things easier, she said, is that every river basically has the same sources for pollution, and people can do a lot to control that, including properly disposing of motor oil and other hazardous substances, as well as unused and unwanted medication.

"When we pollute the water, we're polluting somebody's drinking water down the line," she said. "It's just making kids aware of these issues because they're the ones who are hopefully going to come up with the solution. We're working on it, but it's going to be up to them."

Amy Lavalley is a freelance reporter for the Post-Tribune.

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