

Students canoe, explore Kankakee River



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ROB.EARNSHAW@NWI.COM, (219) 548-4352

KOUTS | About 800 area students explored the history and ecology of the "Everglades of the North" recently during Kankakee River Days at Dunn's Bridge.

The weeklong pilot program will become an annual event said Nicole Messacar, of the LaPorte County Soil and Water Conservation District, which is hosting it.

School groups from throughout the Kankakee River Basin were invited to take part in the educational and adventure program that includes learning about water quality, wetlands ecology and a nearly one-hour canoe trip on the Kankakee River.

The Northwest Indiana Paddling Association gave the kids lessons on water safety while the Minneapolis-based Wilderness Inquiry supplied six, 24-foot canoes for the student trips on the river.

Wilderness Inquiry Outdoor Educator Grant Armour said the idea is to get the gets on the river using the canoes as tools to understand the local waterways.

"While we're on the boats we ask the kids to take a look around them to see what they see and don't see," he said. "We talk about erosion and the human impacts on our environment. We're having a really great time."

Tom "Coyote" Larson is a real-life fur trapper and member of the American Mountain Man Association. He laid out several animal furs while he talked to the students about what life was like 200 years ago when the area was all marsh land.

"It's giving them a piece of history and it's the first time they've been around some of the animals like this," Larson said.

The fur trapping station was a favorite of students from Valparaiso's Hayes Leonard Elementary School including Brooke Corneil, 11, and Lindsey Giesler, 10.

"I thought it was cool," Lindsey said.

Brooke, who was also analyzing water to see what organisms can live in it, said the fur trapping was neat because "you got to feel all the animal skin."

Ryan Herr, an eighth-grader at St. Patrick Catholic School in Chesterton, said canoeing was a fun activity.

"It's something we don't always get to do," he said. "It's been very educational."