

Geolocating Your Inner Ecologist

Tracie Chapo, Nebraska

tchapo@lps.org

In grade 10 Biology, I am able to use 14 acres of wetlands on the school property to illustrate a lot of what I teach in the classroom, particularly in the Ecology unit. When I first started taking kids outside, the biggest obstacle was their aversion to getting dirty, which was largely solved with a lot of rubber boots. A bigger obstacle was their fear of getting lost or bitten or otherwise hurt. They would follow me around anywhere I went, but the lessons were totally me-centered, and they lacked the confidence to explore at all. I wrote grants to purchase handheld GPS units and programmed waypoints in 4 distinctly different areas of the wetland: the pond, a stand of mature willows, some sharply eroded creekbanks, and a saline soils area. Students, in groups of 4-6, were shown how to use the GPS and then find the waypoints. At each, they described the general area and conditions, and then detailed what was different from their last point. This was a wonderful exercise in observation and compare/contrast, and it completely reversed the students' and my roles. Now they are telling me about what's out there, instead of me telling them!

Regarding the grants, I combined two: one was an outdoor education mini-grant from our local Natural Resources District, and the other was a Community Cleanup grant from the city/county health department. I think the past few years' focus on the benefits of getting kids outside in nature has made more organizations willing to fund activities to do that.