

SCHOOL ON SATURDAY



KidScience students spent five days in June learning field biology at the International Conservation Center in Somerset.

THE ZOO'S KIDSCIENCE PROGRAM HAS MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS EXCITED ABOUT TAKING THEIR LEARNING TO NEW LEVELS ON THE WEEKENDS

BY MANDY REVAK

Many middle school students look forward to Saturdays as a much-needed respite from a long week of learning. For the kids in the Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium's KidScience program, however, Saturdays mean the chance to do some hands-on learning in one of the coolest classrooms imaginable – the entire Zoo.

Whether designing new toys for the tigers, building tunnels for the meerkats, or studying the behavior of elephant families, the students in the Zoo's KidScience program get an experience that is unique, to say the least.

"While many tweens and teens are sleeping in or hanging out with friends," says Sharon Goughnour, science

teacher at Winchester Thurston, and assistant KidScience teacher, "KidScience students are making genuinely important contributions to the Zoo and broadening their own horizons."

KidScience is a year-round education program for middle school students. It focuses on conservation and animal behavior research. The program attracts highly-motivated students who willingly give up their Saturdays (and weekdays during the summer) to help out the Zoo.

Recently, the students spent many hours observing the behavior of the Zoo's African Painted Dogs. At all hours of the day, KidScience representatives could be spotted near the dog exhibit with stopwatches and clipboards in hand. In

October, they presented their research to world-renowned wildlife biologist Greg Rasmussen, Founder and Director of the Painted Dog Conservation organization in Zimbabwe.

"Greg was so impressed with all the hard work that he couldn't stop talking about the kids," says Karen Vacco, the Zoo's assistant mammal curator. "He said that the next time he is in town, he wants to spend a good part of the day with them."

Though the students come from diverse backgrounds, they are united by their passion for animals. KidScience tends to attract the best and brightest from local school districts, but participation is by no means limited to honor roll or gifted students. There is no grade point average requirement to take part.



This eclectic mix means that students benefit not only from the education gained through class lessons, but they also learn from each other about leadership, teamwork, friendship, and social awareness.

By approaching science in a meaningful way, the kids are given the opportunity to use the scientific method in a real-world setting. Students as young as 11 or 12 years old learn terms and techniques that many experts don't see until college. The research skills that KidScience students develop during their Zoo work projects often translates into academic success.

"I get A's on my lab reports in science because of the KidScience research project at the end of the year," said ninth-grader Hannah Mellor.

The kids' efforts translate into good things for the animals, as well.

Two years ago, KidScience students, armed with the knowledge that meerkats live in tunnels in the African desert, designed a system of tunnels made from PVC pipe that was added to the existing exhibit.

"Being burrowers, the meerkats took right to the tunnels," says lead reptile keeper Ray Banrick. "The meerkats use the system to sleep, retreat from perceived danger, and search for treats. It's a project that continues to benefit the meerkats."

KidScience students also get to participate in exclusive Zoo-sponsored activities. In June, second-year KidScience students spent five days camping at the Zoo's International Conservation Center Eco-Camp learning techniques that allow field biologists to study animals in their natural habitats, such as orienteering with a map and compass and using GPS tracking systems.

Students who start in KidScience in middle school often move on to the Zoo's high school program, Zoo U. From there, some go on to study biology or zoology in college and earn prestigious internships with the nation's best Zoos (including our own). One student, Sean Broderick, represented the Zoo as a student ambassador to Polar Bears International's

Student Leadership Conference in Churchill, Manitoba, Canada in 2008.

"I plan to major in biology or animal behavior in college so that I can work with zoo animals," says Brock Neff, who finished two years of KidScience and now is involved with the Zoo U. program. "It has always been my passion and this program helped me confirm that as my career path."

The next time you're at the Zoo and you see kids in green shirts taking

notes about the animals, ask them about their project. You might be surprised at what you can learn. **Z**

Applications for the 2010-2011 KidScience program will be accepted this spring. For more information, please contact the KidScience and Zoo U. coordinator at 412-366-2567 or mrevak@pittsburghzoo.org.

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