

# Nature Field Trips: More Than Just

BY PATRICIA POTTS

**I**t was early May during my first year of teaching, and my 7th and 8th graders were studying flowering plants in science class. One sunny afternoon, on a whim, I decided to take the class on a nature walk through the neighboring park in an effort to identify spring wildflowers. While some students seemed genuinely interested in the differences between mustards and lilies, a good portion of the class was simply relieved to be out of the classroom and more interested in socializing with their fellow students. I spent a lot of time maintaining crowd control rather than focusing on learning objectives. The students returned to school in high spirits, glad to have “had a break,” while I felt frustrated.

Does this story sound familiar? What comes to mind when you hear the words “field trip”? A fun day, a non-teaching day, when the students run wild? Have you been discouraged because your nature field trips become little more than a hike to burn off excess energy rather than an in-depth study of God’s second book? Is the amount of knowledge the students acquire disproportionate to the time and energy you expend to organize these trips?

Let’s see how a few simple changes can make the ordinary field trip experience extraordinary. Several years ago, grades 2 to 4 in Rosemary Bailey’s Jackson, Michigan, classroom were studying plants—shapes, basic life cycle, and photosynthesis. Mrs. Bailey crafted lessons using the textbook, posters, and potted plants.

At the end of the unit, the class visited a local nature center. In preparation for the trip, the staff at the center had worked with Mrs. Bailey to expand the concepts studied in class. The students spent time in the forest and meadow drawing plants in their journals and looking for the plant characteristics discussed in class. They were excited to discover that the concepts they had learned in class were useful at the nature center. They were able to intelligently answer questions asked by the center director and did well on a test over the unit. During the remainder of the year, whenever conversation turned to plant-related topics, they fondly recalled information they had learned during the trip to the nature center.



While the above two stories deal with the same subject matter—studying plants—the experiences and outcomes were very different. Clearly, the second field trip provided a better learning experience. To help you transform your nature field trips into purposeful and curriculum-linked experiences rather than simply “fun” days when the students escape the classroom, here are some ideas to consider.

# “Fun”



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or her class on a multi-day canoe trip to study a river system, but the class could design and maintain a schoolyard habitat.

**C**heck with your local city or state, the Department of Natural Resources, local nature centers, and wildlife agencies. They may need volunteers to conduct water testing in local streams, monitor or count certain types of wildlife, weed out exotic and invasive species of plants, do air-quality testing, or help to clear and repair hiking trails.

Whatever catches your interest, make sure it is something that goes beyond a simple tour, walk, or lecture. Search for experiences that will really get your class involved and actively learning.

### **Adequate Planning**

It is essential to link these nature-based experiences to what is being taught in class. Allow sufficient time to plan your nature field trip. Don't wait until the end of the school year to try and fit something in. Survey upcoming topics in your classes, and then contact the local museum or science center to see if they are offering programs that relate to what your class will be studying.

### **Thorough Class Preparation**

To prepare the students for the field trip, be sure to spend time in the classroom acquainting them with the material. This may take the form of group research projects, classroom discussion, and/or viewing videos.

### **Hold Students Responsible for Their Learning**

Plan the activities so structured, active learning occurs during the field trip. Don't settle for having the students listen to a lecture given by a harassed tour guide, or expecting your chaperones to get the students to read all the plaques containing important information as they move from one exhibit to the next. Design the assignment so the students get actively involved in working together to solve problems or gathering information for analysis or discussion. Students should be held accountable for and assessed on the knowledge and skills gained during the experience. This could take the form of a traditional test, a report, or a journal.

### **Adequate, Well-Trained Support**

These experiences will not be possible without recruiting a small army of volunteers. Usually these come from a pool of well-meaning parents who take a day off from work. Alas, not every parent is a natural at crowd control. While most of the students are upstairs in one wing of the museum studying the

### **Start With a Great Idea**

Start the process by finding a project you can get excited about. Look for ideas in a good book, current film, or on the Internet. Nature field trips can be one-day events, multi-day, overnight programs, or ongoing projects that last weeks or months. Think about what would be appropriate to the maturity of your class. For example, a K-3 teacher would not take his

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fauna of the Great Plains, one group has managed to escape their chaperone and is playing tag in the dinosaur exhibit. Or worse yet, a chaperone has released his charges at the front door and sauntered off to explore on his own.

**T**o avoid these mishaps, schedule a meeting for chaperones before your field trip. Hold it after school or in the evening when the volunteers can attend.

Make sure they know exactly what is required of them. Prepare a handout with a schedule of the event, assignments the students should complete during the field trip, and tips on behavior management. Allow time for questions. Check to make sure the volunteers have filled out the required insurance paperwork and background check information.

Make sure your volunteers know how much they are appreciated. A small thank-you note or a quick phone call after the trip will help ensure their continued support.

### Keep the Principal and Parents Informed

It is essential that your principal supports you in these ventures, so keep him or her informed of your plans. If your school requires administrative permission for field trips, make sure you complete the forms on time. Longer trips will require school board and even conference approval, so plan ahead.

Also, keep the parents informed. This is especially important if the field trip will involve a significant amount of time or funding. Some parents have very strong feelings about whether to allow their children to participate in these events. School open houses, newsletters, or e-mail are great ways to communicate with parents.

### Take It Slowly

One of the greatest mistakes a teacher can make is getting involved in too many projects. Planning high-quality learning experiences outside the classroom takes a lot of time and energy. Go slowly. Plan during the summer or a school vacation, when you have a bit more time than usual. Start by constructing a one-day experience, and then progress from there. Schedule only one major field trip (such as an overnight stay or extended project) a year. That way, you will avoid burnout and poorly planned activities.

In conclusion, field trips can be transformed from an escape



from the classroom into an integral part of the curriculum. While it will take effort to plan and implement these experiences, the enthusiasm for learning elicited in the students makes it well worth it. ✍



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