

Students get the inside scoop on the May River

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Take a little soy sauce, add red and green sugar sprinkles, a few mini chocolate chips and a spritz of water and you have a recipe for pollution.

That is what Cynthia Jani cooked up for her Bluffton Middle School seventh-graders who participated in the Kids in Kayaks program on the May River near the Bluffton Oyster Factory.

The Enviroscape — complete with houses, farms, cars, boats, an oil tanker and even oysters — was a definite hit with students who saw first hand what even a little carelessness can do to bodies of water. Not only did Jani demonstrate how fertilizer, oil on the roads and animal waste can get into places such as the May River, but she also showed what happens when underground oil tanks and septic tanks lose containment and their contents seep into aquifers that provide everyone with fresh water.

The field trips took place each day this past week and gave students an opportunity to evaluate the May River ecosystem, conduct water quality testing, and experience the local saltwater marsh in a kayak. The kayaks were provided by Water-Dog Outfitter.

David Fleming, a guide and instructor with the Hilton Head-based business, said his company has been working with the Bluffton school since the effort began a few years ago.

"We do basic stuff with the kids — check the tide, salinity, pH levels, dissolve oxygen," Fleming said. "It's amazing, More kids are signing up which means the word is getting back how cool it is to do this. And the kids really get it.

"Their teachers have done a great job with them. I'm not just telling them what this and that is, but asking them and they know the answers."

"Getting it" is not just understanding how pollution gets into the river, but what it looks like and how it affects what lives in the water.

Kristen Thorne and her partner McKenna Avichouser looked under a field microscope. While one identified the material in the dish, the other drew a picture. The goal was to understand what can be found in the water.

"They're examining a fouling community that can be found under the docks," said teacher Sharon McMahon. "They put samples in the petri dish and use the field guides on the table so they can draw and identify what they see."

And then there was the kayaking.

"It was wet but fun. This was really cool," Thorne said.

"We got soaked. And we got beached once," said Avichouser. "We got to see things I didn't know were inside a barnacle."

About 25 students at a time were divided up into two groups with teachers, a few parents and guides, given basic kayaking instructions, life vests and a kayak. With their partner, students traveled two to a

boat, the adults used the one-seaters. Then the groups headed out in two different directions on the May River.

"They're out there getting in the mud, looking in the grasses," Fleming said, "and looking for dolphins and really cool stuff."

Last year, students went out on the river on a December day that was unexpectedly cold for the area and Fleming said they were out on the water in 30-degree temperatures. Conducting the trips in early October make a lot of difference, but the students seemed to have fun no matter what time of year, he said.

That was evident as the two groups out on the river headed for home. Coming from opposite directions, it was no surprise that the lead kayakers in each party turned the final stretch into a race.

Even though Abi Quiles and Maxayanne Vega beat the boys back to the beach, Eduardo Leyba and Tabb Hanson were still enthusiastic about their day.

"It was awesome, man" Leyba said. "I'd do it all over again."