

Teachers Become Students At Water Workshop

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SIERRA VISTA — A collective “Awwww” arose from the students as Debbie Ilse’s milk-carton house washed away into the river.

“My house is still standing,” said Alecia Proctor with satisfaction. “You still have to pay me rent,” she told her tenant on the high ground.



Nellie Brant from Col. Johnston Elementary School on Fort Huachuca uses a watering can to demonstrate rain on the Rolling River display during the Arizona Conserve Water workshop at the University of Arizona Sierra Vista Campus on Thursday morning. (Beatrice Richardson•Herald/Review)

Ilse is a second-grade teacher at Huachuca Mountain Elementary School, while Proctor teaches sixth grade at Sierra Vista Middle School. But on Thursday they were the students for an all-day “Arizona Conserve Water” workshop sponsored by the University of Arizona Cochise County Cooperative Extension and Arizona Project WET.

The free workshop was designed to give K-12 teachers new ideas and interactive techniques to use in the classroom — and outside, too — to help students understand and think about the environment.

Particularly water.

On Thursday morning, the 17 participants “built” their own community in The Rolling River, an open trailer housing a model of a watershed that is used to demonstrate the effects of nature (and humans) on the landscape.

“Kids are amazed at the power of water,” said Alison Barrett, an instructional specialist with the Co-op Extension, as she turned up the water flow in the trailer. “When we take the Rolling River to schools they get very creative about building bridges and farms, thinking if they pack the soil tight enough they’ll be OK.”

The “soil” in the Rolling River is actually a special sand made of plastic beads from recycled pop, milk and detergent bottles.

“When we did a unit on rocks and minerals last year we read about erosion, but they really didn’t get it. This shows it,” said Bonnie Fisher, third-grade teacher at Huachuca Mountain.

The day was not even half over and Lorraine Draeger was more than convinced of the workshop’s value.

“Kids need to know about these concepts and what we’re doing today is more concrete, less abstract. Plus it’s fun,” said the third-grade teacher from General Myer school on Fort Huachuca.

Nothing was more concrete than teacher Steve Short’s experiment to demonstrate transpiration. Earlier in the morning he had placed a Ziploc plastic bag over the tip of a branch on a small shrub. Before noon, the bag had easily collected a tablespoon of water.

“But would I want to drink it?” wondered the Town & Country Elementary School teacher.

“Teachers are wonderful students,” Barrett said. “You give them the foundation of something and they just add to it.”

With “professional development,” or continuing education, one of the major buzzwords among schoolteachers and administrators these days, the opportunity to share and collaborate in a learning experience was evident at the conserve water workshop.

In another experiment, teachers had simply poured some water into a plastic cup and placed a rolled-up paper towel inside, sticking out over the rim. The water had, of course, crept its way up the dry portion of the paper.

“Capillary action,” reminded Carmen Miller, another workshop instructional specialist.

“You could color the water,” offered Patricia Stickler, fourth-grade teacher at Town & Country. “You could measure it, you could time it.”

Stickler was excited to attend the workshop, saying it’s difficult to find age-appropriate science textbooks and that she volunteered to pilot a new series of books in her class this school year.

“I like to try new and different things,” she said.

Teachers also were refreshed in their comprehension and pronunciation of common terms in the water cycle, such as evaporation, condensation and precipitation.

“All life in the desert has made adaptations,” Miller told the class of adults. “Except people.”

She added that newcomers to Arizona from the Midwest or the South want the same water usage they previously enjoyed.

Stickler interjected that a pet peeve is seeing automatic sprinklers in operation during a rainstorm.

Miller also used the Rolling River watershed display to demonstrate how residential, commercial

and government properties could landscape with swales (troughs) and berms to slow down runoff, water plantings naturally and improve recharge into the aquifer.

“If an inch of rain falls, a 1,000-square-foot roof will run off 600 gallons of water,” Miller said. “Harvesting water has been going on for thousands of years. It can be primitive or sophisticated. Passive or active. Kids need to know about and notice these things.”

She added that learning about water is not just a science lesson but also leads into lessons about property rights and the socio-economic issues of a community.

“This has been extremely educational,” said Huachuca Mountain’s Debbie Ilse. “It’s all hands-on stuff I can take right back to the classroom. And it’s going to help with my own landscape at home, too.”

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