



Program teaches lessons in the woods

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By KRISTI ALBERTSON/Daily Inter Lake |

For the last several weeks, children have been tromping through the woods in the Swan Valley.

They depart from the Swan Ecosystem Center in Condon, small groups of students armed with backpacks and a sense of adventure, thrilled to be outside rather than stuck in a classroom.

An advertisement for the 2009 Subaru Forester. At the top left is a gold award trophy icon. Next to it, the text reads "The Subaru Forester.® Motor Trend's 2009 Sport/Utility of the Year™". Below this is a side-profile image of a blue 2009 Subaru Forester. Underneath the car, it says "2009 Subaru Forester 2.5X - #9FA - Starting at \$19,995". A small banner below the car says "Test-drive the award-winning 2009 Subaru Forester" with the Subaru logo. At the bottom, the "GLACIER SUBARU" logo is displayed, followed by the address "1212 Highway 2 East | Kalispell, MT 59901 | (406) 755-6687" and the website "www.glaciersubaru.com". A dark blue banner at the very bottom contains the slogan "WE WANT TO SEE YOU IN A SUBARU!" in white.

Learning takes place along the trail, with guides pointing out animal tracks and interesting plants.

The hikes are part of the center's education program, education coordinator Diann Ericson explained.

The Swan Ecosystem Center, a community-based nonprofit that encourages collaboration on

land-use issues, hopes to educate people of all ages on ecosystems in the Swan Valley. To that end, the center applied in 2007 for a grant from Seattle-based outdoor gear company REI.

REI gave the center \$5,000 to buy snowshoes and cross-country ski equipment to help people explore the Swan Valley during the winter. The rest of the grant money was used to offer schools and other groups up to \$250 to transport youths to the center to hike.

More than 150 students from schools and groups in the Swan Valley, Kalispell, Bigfork and Missoula areas have come to Condon to hike.

"The reason we're doing this is because we as a nation have begun to realize that our kids aren't getting outdoors enough," Ericson said. "REI buys into that."

The center had hoped to start hiking with kids last spring, Ericson said, but a typically stubborn Montana winter deterred them from hiking until this fall.

"It really isn't hiking weather until after school is out," Ericson said. She laughed and added, "This fall hasn't worked out very well either."

Despite unpredictable weather, the center has taken kids hiking every week since mid-September. Even on damp, rainy days, youths in rain gear have hit the trails.

The center doesn't supply rain gear for the students; it's up to teachers to tell their students how to dress, Ericson said.

"They have been very successful in having the kids properly dressed," she said.

Heather Dickey, a seventh-grade teacher at Fair-Mont-Egan School, took her class to the Swan in late September. Another teacher had heard about the program but wasn't able to take her class, Dickey explained, so she jumped at the opportunity.

"I feel like as educators, we do anything we can to inspire our kids," she said. "And some kids learn better being outside."

There is a big push nationwide to get kids outside, said Carter Eash, a seventh-grade science teacher at Kalispell Middle School. He took 25 students to the center in mid-October.

"Students are becoming less and less likely to be outdoors, to explore and play around on their own," he said. "It's kind of our charge to start bringing the classroom more outdoors."

During the hikes, guides and teachers discussed the geography of the area

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and pointed out plants and trees. Students learned about science-related topics almost without realizing it.

"Kids have so much structure. They just kind of need to have real-life situations," Dickey said. "Hiking was perfect for that."

Kids also learn about safety on the trail and how to have minimal impact on the land, Ericson said.

Because they hiked in small groups, students had a chance to interact with each other and with their teachers more than they might in a classroom setting. Eash and Dickey said the hikes provided a good opportunity for teachers to bond with their students.

"Outside of the classroom, they got to see me in a different role - outdoors, where I enjoy being," Eash said.

The teachers agreed that they would recommend the hikes to other educators.

"It was a great experience for my kids to be outside and interacting with nature and each other," Dickey said.

With winter fast approaching, the hikes have been put on hold. Ericson hopes to continue them next year.

"We hope that [the grant] will be extended through next fall," she said. "Hopefully REI will not have to cut us off."

On the Web:

www.swanecosystemcenter.org

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