

Studying the Savannas



Photo provided

Raheem Brown and Brandon Bovee (orange kayak, front, back) wait for Nicole Brosteneant, left, and teacher Nick Kresalude, right, as they prepare to take a trip to an island at Savannas Preserve State Park in Port St. Lucie. Teacher Tom McLaughlin (red kayak) also awaits the trip. Such trips are allowing Southport Middle School seventh-graders to identify native plant species of both the marsh and the pine flatwoods.

Savanna Bobcats' Experience allows students to do lab work in the park four times a year

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ST. LUCIE COUNTY — When seventh-grade students from Southport Middle School talk about mapping ecosystems or comparing plants and animals, they know what they're talking about.

They've actually been there, done that, in an unusual new part of their science class this year that takes them out into the Savannas for labs several times a year.

"It's fun being outside and being into the environment and learning in a more interesting way," said Shiana Brown, 13.

Their Life Sciences teacher, Cristina Veresan, teamed up with the other Bobcats team teachers, education staff and volunteers from the Savannas Preserve State Park in Port St. Lucie to create a course of study that takes the students to field labs in the park four times a year.

They experienced their first lab a couple of weeks ago.

"Science is fun, not boring, when you learn about it in different ways," said seventh-grader Victoria Farren, 12.

Called The Savanna Bobcats' Experience, the program rotates 90 seventh-grade students through the labs. The school divides students into groups

INCORPORATING FIELD LABS INTO CLASSROOM

- Math teacher Tom McLaughlin had students analyze rainfall data. Students made rain gauges to collect rainwater at home; they plotted their locations on a map of Port St. Lucie, and then they graphed the data over time.
- Language arts teacher Chuck Oberlander asked students to write about water issues in South Florida.
- Jessica Camargo, social studies teacher, had students write to state lawmakers about changing the state bird to the Florida scrub jay.
- Reading class teacher Linnea Norton used the experience as an opportunity for reading about the history of the Savannas.
- Science teacher Cristina Veresan had students complete pre- and post-lab surveys. She also integrated park wildlife into lessons about classification and scientific inquiry.

called teams, with animal names.

"Students are doing science that cannot be done in the classroom," Veresan said. "They are participating in authentic hands-on, minds-on activities using scientific inquiry. Many students, some of whom are not successful in the classroom, excel in an active, outdoor setting."

They designed the course to meet state standards and to include hands-on lessons the teachers could use in other classes.

In one lab, students kayak out into the marsh and then hike back through the woods. Their goal is to identify and map three ecosystems by identifying the

plants that live in each. In another, small groups collect bugs and marine creatures, describe them on information sheets and then pass the unlabeled sheets to another group for identification.

"I like looking closely at each of the animals and naming the features like gills, wings, fins, legs, nose, mouth, eyes," said Arlene Mabry, 12. "Classification that's hands-on!"

A third lab has students using solar cells, which change sunlight into electricity, and measuring the electrical activity of leaf cells as they do the same to compare the efficiency of the two.

In the fourth lab, students take a hayride to examine areas

that underwent controlled burning as a means of creating a healthier and safer forest, reducing chances of an out-of-control forest fire.

"They do things called prescribed burns," said Kelli Meyers, 12. "That's when the plant life grows too big and animals can't get food so they burn the plant life."

"It seems most students were unaware of controlled burns as a management practice, though many said they had noticed the sight or smells of burns on occasion," Veresan said.

The program does more than teach science and enhance lessons in other classroom subjects, though.

"It also allows students to engage in physical activity; some students might find that outdoor sports like kayaking and hiking bring them incredible joy and are a good way to keep fit," Veresan said. "Working together in groups helps with good character and social development, too. And for teachers, developing meaningful, productive relationships with students is at the heart of most of our successes."

Kelli Meyers summed it up: "Science is not just textbooks and worksheets. You can actually make a difference while learning. I've learned to like science a lot more."