The Value of Student Learning in an Outdoor Education Setting
by Lisa Jenkins

Learning in an outdoor setting is invaluable to students due to its many benefits. During the series of workshops that I attended through Michigan Tech University, I have gained valuable information and teaching ideas to expose my current class to as well as my camp nature students.

The first workshop that I attended in January was located on Belle Isle, in Detroit at the Nature Center Zoo. I was highly impressed with the facility, as I had not been there in several years, or attended any events. It is a place that I took students to in the past on field trips but did not know that it had a new program somewhat merged with the former Belle Isle Zoo that had closed several years ago. As I participated in the activities, I reflected on the fact that “Outdoor” education facilitates the development of the five senses in students and particularly in young students by using a natural setting and outdoor surroundings for active hands-on learning. In one activity, our seminar group used various measuring tools to measure the depth and height of snow and the temperature of snow at varying levels. The use of measurement and temperature tools in such an activity builds prior knowledge skills in young students and reinforces scientific knowledge and research/lab skills in older students while providing an interesting classroom that will hopefully inspire additional personal investigation in related areas. Our group looked at snowflake shapes, size, and related properties of snowflake formation. Such activities give students choices and concrete experiences that can and will be a prior knowledge base for future class and personal investigations.

Another very valuable activity at the Belle Isle Nature Zoo was the animal tracking activity. Our seminar group learned basic tracking skills and animal travel direction indicators. This activity also provided concrete learning experiences through the use of the indoor class time and skill application time outside. The activity allowed for all student learning styles through the varied simple investigations and learning opportunities outdoors. The beginning class work built prior knowledge skills and surveyed existing student understanding. Our group was able to find and identify wildflowers and animal food sources for the winter season.

I have taken my current Pre-school class outside on winter nature walks since the seminar and we have found bird and animal tracks around our playground as well as food sources. My class was mesmerized by their discoveries and we expanded our activity to bird observation by putting different types of food sources outside and doing a daily observation time and outdoor investigation time with journal picture writing and dictated descriptions. In the camp setting where I teach during the summer, I plan to utilize the tracking and wildflower identification during the scavenger hunts and nature walks to enhance the knowledge base of my students. This activity will help students see that the outdoor setting around them, whether urban or rural, provides a knowledge base that needs to be explored and investigated.

During my seminar at O.W. Holmes, with ladies from the Greening of Detroit, we visited several school based–schoolyard habitats and outdoor classroom spaces. I was inspired to become more active at my school to help design and create a natural outdoor classroom space and habitat around our existing playscape. The Beautification committee has plans for expanding the existing play area with a butterfly and wildflower garden. A garden club will be formed in the 2010 – 2011 school year.

In the camp setting, the existing butterfly garden will be expanded this year and students will begin designing an outdoor classroom space adjacent to the existing nature cabin and butterfly habitat. The O.W. Holmes seminar gave me a wealth of ideas regarding additional funding sources and outside partnerships to complete the expanding outdoor classroom space. Many students return from year to year to work on the habitat area. Last summer I met the Greening of Detroit ladies and this summer their education component is scheduled to visit the camp and assist with the habitat space. There are tree stumps that can be arranged as seating for the classroom space and a natural hill area where the
classroom space serves as a natural amphitheater. I plan to have daily nature listening and observation time in addition to the existing nature journal and reflection time. Students often come to camp without the experience of listening to the natural sounds and smells around them. I have and will continue to provide an opportunity and reason for students to tune into natural sounds and sensations that they are often unaware of at home. Often students find that there is a “quiet” spot in their backyard or local park that they can go to and filter out city sounds from nature sounds.

The seminars that I have attended were excellent and gave me many additional ideas to use at my school and in the summer camp nature classroom setting. I look forward to continuing my outdoor education studies and I know that the outdoor classroom setting is the most important prior knowledge base that a student can have throughout their school career.