



News

On the pursuit of conservation

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Students dive into education program

By Jeff Shaffer

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MIFFLINBURG — Life is precious — and sometimes a rather delicate balance — as sixth-grade science students are learning at the Mifflinburg Middle School.

Joe Southerton's classes are raising brook trout, from eggs to fingerlings, with the end result of releasing as many healthy little fish as possible into Buffalo Creek.

The students are being schooled in caring for this watery school through the Trout in the Classroom (TIC) environmental education program, a cooperation between the Pa. Fish and Boat Commission, the state Department of Education and Pa. Trout Unlimited. In this case, the local R.B. Winter Chapter of TU. Jere Motto, a former Mifflinburg teacher, is serving as the chapter representative.



TAKING CARE OF THE LITTLE ONES — From left, sixth-graders Hannah Spotts and Morgan Kyler, both of Mifflinburg, check the pH level of a water sample taken from the aquarium where hundreds of brook trout are being raised. Joe Southerton's science classes are carefully monitoring the fish as they grow, with the hope of releasing them in the spring. Photo by Jeff Shaffer/Standard Journal.

According to Southerton, there are approximately 100 schools in the state carrying out similar projects. The Mifflinburg students started a month ago, and already they are seeing some incredible transformations. The eggs are moving, and have little tails and little eyes. They'll draw nutrition from the eggs they are attached to as they develop, and then start to resemble something more like a trout. By the spring, they could be about four inches long. It'll take a couple of years before the fish are adult size.

But, while in infancy, their caretakers must remain diligent. The TIC program familiarizes students with coldwater conservation. They must monitor the temperature, check pH levels and protect the eggs from UV light.

The Fish and Boat Commission provided 400 eggs to the class, but even on arrival, 84 of them were already dead. The students, carefully, had to pick the dead ones — identified by a whitish color and fungus — from the living. In the real world, only 1 or 2 percent of a female's eggs will survive, Southerton said. And, females can potentially lay up 1,000 in the redd (trout nest) at one time.

"They're learning about the cycles of life," Southerton said. "They aren't happy to pull out the dead ones, but they see how nature is."

There are several environmental factors the students won't have to deal with, but it'll remain a challenge.

Students Morgan Kyler and Hannah Spotts, both of Mifflinburg, said they are having fun looking after the brook trout — Pennsylvania's only native stream dwelling salmonid — and are genuinely concerned about the survival of them.

"They're seeing how important fresh water is, and it's so delicate," Southerton said.

The science teacher has been thrilled thus far by the various elements of the program and is thankful for the financial support that made it possible. Mifflinburg Bank & Trust contributed \$500, which was matched with another \$500 by the Fish and Boat Commission. Specific equipment is needed to transform a 55-gallon aquarium into a mini-coldwater ecosystem.

"I thought this would be pretty cool," said Southerton, who took a class over the summer to prepare for TIC. "This is a good learning experience.

"The best way to protect coldwater is to educate."

It's no great stretch of the imagination to picture some sort of trash, litter, tire or even an appliance that ends up in or by the creek, he said. Hopefully, conservation and good practices will stick with the students for years to come, and they can share it with others.

"Living here (with the nearby Buffalo and Penns creeks) they should know all about these neat resources."

Southerton is anticipating an afterschool field trip, sometime close to Earth Day, to release the trout near the headwaters of Buffalo Creek.

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