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Verde River is focus of students' expeditionary learning



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PRESCOTT - When ninth-grade students at the Northpoint Expeditionary Learning Academy in Prescott study the Verde River, they really study the Verde River.

They not only spend an entire semester on a single subject in a wide variety of classes, but they also integrate that subject into real-world examples in their hometown.



Joanna Dodder/The Daily Courier
Sam Reid-McKee relates what he learned about the Verde River's hydrology.

It's no wonder they call it expeditionary learning.

Only about 150 schools in the country are Expeditionary Learning schools, and only three expeditionary high schools including Northpoint are mentors to other expeditionary schools, language arts teacher Jeff Dyer said.

This semester the Northpoint ninth-graders focused on the Verde River. Along with studying the native flora and fauna, they tackled the complex geology, hydrology, water law and water quality issues related to the local river.

They created a children's book for local middle school kids, and practiced their statistical skills by surveying Prescott residents about their knowledge of local water issues, student Vivian Cook related.

They created posters that featured maps, charts and drawings of more than a dozen subcategories, from macroinvertebrates to invasive fish to water quality.

"Every picture you see here is hand drawn," student Jacob Cloward said. "It was a long process to make these posters."

As a finale to their work, the students invited local elected officials to come view their posters last Friday at a county government building in Prescott and hear what they learned.

Groups of one to three students stood next to each poster at last Friday's event and described their work to onlookers. They got to choose their subjects.

"I thought geology would be most interesting, and I didn't think how hard it would be," said

student Sam Reid-McKee of Prescott as he explained the maps and charts on his poster about the hydrology of the river basin.

He had to give a speech about one of the more controversial topics in the local water world, whether Prescott should pump water from the Big Chino Aquifer in the Paulden region. Reid-McKee noted that scientists generally agree the Big Chino supplies at least 80 percent of the baseflow for the Upper Verde.

"Most of us said the Big Chino shouldn't be pumped," Reid-McKee related. "This (Verde River corridor) is one of the last riparian habitats in Arizona."

Reid-McKee says he visited the Verde River for the first time during this expeditionary learning project, and he worries what will happen to it.

"I never worried about it until we started this expedition," he said. "It's a very scary thing to think about."

Fellow student Robert Brown of Prescott, who worked on a poster about landowners of the Verde River With Kylie Yunis and Nate Lutz, said the Big Chino pipeline appears to be the best source of new water supplies for Prescott right now.

Yunis, who literally lives in the Big Chino Wash in Paulden and has seen it flood her neighbors' homes, said Prescott shouldn't pump in her valley.

Lutz, who lives in Prescott, said his city should use the Big Chino groundwater but do it sustainably.

Ian Dokie of Prescott Valley, Kendall Yanzick of Prescott and Devin Beitzel of Prescott worked on the water quality poster. They said they learned that pollutants such as estrogen pills and lead threaten the health of the river and its fish. So do people who drive vehicles illegally through the Upper Verde waters, Yanzick added.

The Forest Service needs to put up more signs to warn people it's illegal to drive in the Upper Verde, Yanzick said.

It would help if Congress makes it a Wild and Scenic River, Dokie added.

Secretary of State Ken Bennett, state representatives Andy Tobin and Karen Fann, Prescott Mayor Marlin Kuykendall and Prescott Council Member Jim Lamerson were among those attending Friday's event.

"You probably know a hundred times more than an average adult living in this area," concluded Fann, who lives in Prescott.

During Northpoint's unscientific poll of local residents at public gathering sites in Prescott, most couldn't answer where they get their water.

Secretary Bennett, who attended Prescott schools, said he was impressed with the students' explanatory skills.

"I'm a big fan of studying things based on a theme," he said.

Representatives of local conservation groups urged the students to stay involved in water

issues.

"Water is critical to the Southwest," said John Zambrano, president of the Citizens Water Advocacy Group. "It's going to be critical the rest of your lives."

Ann-Marie Benz, outreach and communications director for Prescott Creeks, said she has seen the students picking up trash and she thanked them for their efforts.

"We expect a lot of you guys," Benz said. "You're putting out great work, and we're looking forward to seeing where that goes."