

Forestry Education Develops Lasting Tools During COVID

By Dawn Killough

In a year unlike any other, educators were forced to pivot from in-person learning to virtual education. It was a challenge, but it wasn't all bad. New ideas and techniques were developed that turned out to be successful and will be applied hereafter.

Forestry education was no different. Forests Today & Forever took their forestry

education programs that teach young people about forest management and made them accessible to all students in the state.

Director Beth Krisko says, "We want people to understand their relationship with forests and how humans depend on forests for the number of resources that forests provide. So not just timber, but also wildlife habitat, clean water, and recreational opportunities."

Student Programs

Before the pandemic, Forests Today & Forever offered four educational programs: Forest Field Day, Oregon Logging Conference tours, Wood Is Good Career Education, and Outdoor School.

Their most successful event is Forest Field Day, which reaches approximately 2,500 middle school students each year in the Central Willamette Valley of Oregon.

Forest Field Day started in 1994 and offers a comprehensive two-to-six-week curriculum for teachers, as well as an all-day field trip for students to a working forest, Bauman Tree Farm. The program runs in the fall and spring and revolves around teaching kids about conservation, harvesting, replanting, and the business side of managing forests.

"The program culminates with a trip to a working tree farm, where students come out and rotate through stations to learn about the various forest resources. As they're rotating through the stations, they're interacting with professional volunteers who are the people doing the teaching at the stations," Krisko explains.

After the field trip, students return to the classroom and work in groups of four to develop a five-year management plan for a fictitious tree farm. They have to take into consideration preserving wildlife habitat and maintaining appropriate riparian buffers to keep the water clean and healthy.

"It's a cool civics engagement activity, along with nurturing all those skills that aren't easy to teach in the classroom, like problem solving and critical thinking. The project takes them out of those regular activities that they're doing at their desk and engages them and their brains in new ways," says Krisko.

They also partner with Oregon Women In Timber and the Oregon Logging Conference to put on the Oregon Logging Conference School Tour. This is a one-day event that attracts about 700 to 1,000 students from 18 local schools.

In 2019 they began the Wood Is Good Career Education program, which is geared toward high school students who are seeking information about a career in forest management.

Adults can also benefit from their



Family Education Field Days was a hit.



An adult tour provided during COVID.

programs, as they partner with the University of Oregon to provide tours for students, as well as summer teacher tours and public tours.

Their regular in-person programs had to be canceled in 2020 due to the pandemic. However, Forests Today & Forever didn't sit back and rest on their laurels. They were proactive and created tools that teachers could use to teach their students about forest management on a virtual platform.

Going Virtual

In an effort to continue the forest management education portion of their programs, Forests Today & Forever developed online tools that allow teachers to roll out the same curriculum virtually. At the center of the program are several choice boards that offer interactive content for students to learn about wildlife, recreation, timber, soil, and water.

The choice boards were sent to teachers who had previously participated in the Forest Field Day activities. Each board has choices students can make and involves looking at videos, reading content, playing games, and other interactive activities geared to their grade level. Several teachers incorporated the choice boards into their classroom instruction. Roughly 490 students have participated in the program this school year, but reports are not official.

Teachers found the choice boards flexible and easy to use, allowing them to be more creative in their applications. "One thing that I encourage with all of our curriculum, pandemic or not, is that the teachers tailor what we offer to their learning objectives or their objectives for their classroom," says Krisko.

"What we want is our message to come

through about forestry, but we really try to make it flexible so that teachers want to participate and it's an easy thing for them to participate in."

Students said they had a great time working with the choice boards and learning about forests. "It's hard to engage kids online, especially for an organization like us, who values field-based experiences. So it was very inspiring early on to get positive feedback from teachers," says Krisko.

"Many of the kids who have come to our program live in Springfield or Eugene. Some have never been to the forest or a working forest. They have never experienced [the woods]; they've never actually walked on a forest trail or smelled that air. So what we

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Forests Today & Forever is now reaching more students and families with its message of conservation and resource management and are encouraging more students to pursue a career in forestry.

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deliver in normal times can be a life-changing experience for some of these kids.”

An advantage of the new program's virtual nature is that it can be sent to teachers anywhere. Since this initial rollout, it has been sent to contacts throughout Oregon.

The Wood Is Good Career Education program was rolled out virtually as well, co-funded by the Oregon Community Foundation and the N.B. and Jacqueline Giustina Foundation. The program has gained momentum as they were recently contacted by the Portland Public School District about setting up a career event focused on forestry for high schoolers. They have reached 200 students this year with this program.

A new program came about as a result of the pandemic — Family Field Days. Family groups can tour the Bauman Tree Farm similar to the experience of students on Forest Field Days. The new program will continue to be offered in the future to residents throughout the state.

What About the Fires?

Last year's wildfires have brought forest fire into greater focus, and there was increasing call for content about management of

forests in regard to fires and fuel.

In response, Forests Today & Forever is looking for additional grant funding to bring education into classrooms about forest management, how it affects fire danger, and how students can modify their behavior to increase fire safety. They recently purchased a forest fire danger sign for the field trip tree farm. Krisko says, “When Forest Field Day starts back up, we will be incorporating that into the program where we can teach kids about what the different levels mean. And this is what it means for your behaviors, and we hope it will raise awareness... We need to be thinking about fire all the time.”

Perseverance

Forests Today & Forever, whose mission is to encourage forest stewardship through education, reacted to the 2020 pandemic by offering virtual curriculum for educators. Although nothing can replace the experience of being in a forest, they were able to continue to fulfill their mission in an exceedingly difficult year. As a result, the program can now reach more students and families with its message of conservation and resource management and encourage students to pursue a career in forestry.

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