

Getting Their Feet Wet

A WEEKEND PROGRAM OFFERS MID-ATLANTIC HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS
A CHANCE TO EXPERIENCE THE CHESAPEAKE BAY HANDS-ON.

IT'S A SUNNY FRIDAY AFTERNOON IN APRIL AND HIGH SCHOOL senior Devon McCurdy stands on the beach using a pocketknife to dissect a round, marble-sized sea squirt.

"This is so cool," she keeps saying.

"I think that's the digestive system right there," says Susan Faibisch, her science teacher, as she leans over McCurdy's shoulder and points to a tiny brown curlicue inside the squirt.

A few feet away, two sophomore girls are knee-deep in the ocean and dragging a net between them, hoping to dredge up more shallow-water critters. They're mostly getting winter jellyfish (it's still too cold for larger summer jellyfish)—which they were squeamish about picking up at first but now transfer from nets to buckets without hesitation.



Two Chesapeake Bay Foundation educators and two Walkersville High School students examine the washed up shell of a horseshoe crab on Fox Island in Virginia.

The group—14 students and 2 teachers—is from Walkersville High School in Maryland. They're spending three days mucking around the mud of the Chesapeake Bay through an HHMI-funded education program run by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF), a nonprofit group dedicated to improving the health of the Bay. HHMI funds such programs to inspire the next generation of scientists.

This is Faibisch's ninth trip with CBF—she comes both fall and spring with any Walkersville science students who are game for a long weekend of canoeing, crabbing, hiking, exploring, and learning about the history, health, and importance of the Chesapeake Bay.

This weekend, they're staying on Great Fox Island, Virginia, 6 miles off the eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay—a three-hour drive and an hour-long boat ride from Washington, D.C. This 50-acre archipelago houses one of a dozen CBF education centers. About 18 class trips run every spring in April and May, leaving few quiet days in between, and teacher training institutes and leadership programs are held here in the

summer. The lodge is off-the-grid—the few appliances are powered by solar panels on the roof, and the toilets are self-composting; a wood stove is the only heat source. Before they can wash dishes after each meal, the students pedal a bicycle in the kitchen to raise the pressure in a well and start the water running.

When they arrived on the island earlier in the day, the group was greeted by Adam Wickline, the CBF educator who lives on Fox Island all summer. "Ask Adam" becomes a refrain both students and teachers repeat all weekend. He can rattle off the scientific names of birds, fish, and invertebrates and takes every question seriously.

Wickline spends the weekend encouraging the visitors to immerse themselves in the environment. "We're on island time here," he says. Students and teachers have had to part with their watches, cell phones, and iPods. "This is a time for you to slow down and enjoy the Chesapeake Bay."

Enjoy, and recognize that chances to enjoy the Bay are disappearing, he says. Sitting on the beach Friday night, Wickline talks about how much Fox Island has physically shrunk in the past decade due to erosion.

"Within our lifetimes, Fox will probably disappear entirely," he says.

Don Baugh, CBF's vice president for education, has worked for the foundation for 32 years and says that those years have brought scientific progress in understanding the Chesapeake watershed but also worsening of the Bay's condition.

"We gave [the Bay] a D on its latest report card," he says. "And it's failing because of what we're doing on the land."

That's why CBF's trips try to inspire students to care about environmental issues.

"We bring kids to the water," says Baugh. "That automatically engages them. Who isn't interested in being out on the water and dredging things up, seeing what's down there?"

The approach seems to be working. This is 18-year-old McCurdy's second trip—she came last fall and couldn't wait to return once more before graduation. "Coming here really brings it all home," she says. "We sit in science class all year reading our textbooks. Then we get to come here and experience this for ourselves and it makes it about so much more than just numbers and lectures."

When she laughs that she now wants to become a professional sea squirt dissector, McCurdy is joking, but she later says more seriously that biology is on the shortlist of college majors she's considering, in part, she says, because of Fox Island. ■ —SARAH C.P. WILLIAMS

FOR MORE INFORMATION: To see CBF's State of the Bay 2007 Report Card, visit www.cbf.org/site/DocServer/2007SOTBReport.pdf?docID=10923.