

The next generation

Creating a new breed of forest stewards

Peiyu Lin Kitsap Sun | USA TODAY NETWORK

Anakin Petheram, a Mountain View Middle School seventh-grader, walked out of a forest in November able to observe the differences among several tree species: red alder, western red cedar and Douglas fir. Not all trees looked healthy. Some were hurt, he noticed. With the guidance of members of the Great Peninsula Conservancy (GPC) and community volunteers, school teachers and staff, Petheram and his classmates made a field trip to the North Kitsap Heritage Park and GPC's Grovers Creek Preserve.

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Mountain View Middle School seventh-grade student Anakin Petheram, second from the left, and his classmates learn how to plant a tree during a Great Peninsula trip to the North Kitsap Heritage Park on Nov. 18. PEIYU LIN/KITSAP SUN

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Ahead of the field trip, all seventh graders at Mountain View were given the opportunity to take a climate-resilient forests lesson prepared by GPC in the classroom. They discovered how forests can be managed to be more resilient to disturbances caused by climate change, such as fire and pests. Then, on field day, the students headed to the forest, developed an understanding of tree species on their own, took a lopper in hand to cut scotch broom, and heard how GPC and Kitsap County Parks Department personnel manage and take care of the forest in Kitsap.

For the third part of the project, students headed back to the classroom and finished up with discussions of what they learned in the forest, how lands can be managed, and how to protect the ecosystem.

It was the second year GPC took students into the forest. The nonprofit started mapping what it called the Land Labs project in 2020 after the global pandemic stopped its five-week summer camp for students, said GPC's executive director Nathan Daniel. GPC also partners with Catalyst, a charter school in Bremerton, and some other schools to provide field trips to students.

It's a model that enables students to be part of solutions to climate change, said GPC's Community Engagement Manager Claire Voris, who manages the program.

"Because a lot of environmental stories, when you're learning about them, they feel really heavy and too big and they take all the control out of your hands," Voris said. "One of the important elements of Land Labs is this idea of stewardship, and this idea of empowering students by giving them things that they can actually do."

Students who'd been learning online via Zoom indoors because of the global pandemic benefit from the outdoor learning experience, Voris said.

GPC was able to reach out to more students via the Land Labs project compared with the summer camp. A total of 675 students participated in the Land Labs project in 2022, compared with about 20 students usually served at the summer camp, according to Daniel.

"We like this model better," Daniel said.

When asked to recall the most interesting part of the field trip, Petheram talked about hearing the sounds of the animals. His mother, Bobbie-Jo Petheram, who accompanied him on the trip as a volunteer for the school, spoke highly of the program.

"I think it's very good," Bobbie-Jo Petheram said, adding that it's the first time her son was able to go on a field trip in three years. The global pandemic made it difficult for field trips for students.

The seventh-graders were bursting with excitement when being told that they could go on the trip, said Mountain View Middle School seventh-grade science teacher Bianca Wilson, a school staff member who helped plan the field trips with GPC.

"It's definitely something that we want to continue every year," Wilson said, adding she'd like seventh-grader to fall in love with the area they live in through the lessons.

Kitsap County Parks Department natural resources coordinators make themselves available for questions that students may have about career opportunities in forest management.

Sierra Kross, one of the natural resources coordinators who participated in the trips, found it inspiring to see students developing the skills to explore their perspectives and ideas, especially for those who live in Bremerton and didn't have access to "untouched nature" in their backyard, Kross said.

"It definitely looks different than what they have seen before," Kross said.

The Land Labs project was supported by donations from GPC members and grants or funds from several organizations, Daniel said.

While it primarily works with Bremerton schools, GPC hopes to expand the program to different areas of the county. Its vision is to let every student learn how to manage the land they live in, Voris said.

"Because after 50 or 100 years, we still need people to take care of these forests," Voris said.

Last year, GPC, along with other nonprofits, received a \$250,000 donation from an anonymous donor in Bremerton. There is a possibility that the donor would give another donation, but GPC plans to propose to the donor to use part of the money to fund the Land Labs program, Daniel said.

"We definitely want to see the program grow," Daniel said.

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Mountain View Middle School seventh-grade students Amiah Matson, left, and A'Miya Switzer, right, participate in a Great Peninsula Conservancy field trip in the North Kitsap Heritage Park on Nov. 18. PHOTOS BY PEIYU LIN/KITSAP SUN



Mountain View Middle School seventh grade student Dominic Osborn holds a lopper to cut scotch broom.