



After School Conservation Clubs like this one at Mosholu Montefiore Community Center introduce children to nature throughout New York City.

Urban Growth

City Kids Discover Their Green Thumbs

By Angie Eddy

Imagine a child who has never had his hands in dirt, planting seeds to attract butterflies. Or another who thinks she has to travel far from home to see wildlife. Well, sometimes nature is where you least expect to find it.

More than 1,100 New York City students participating in the After School Conservation Club (ASCC) have already learned this lesson as they discover the variety of ecosystems in their own urban neighborhoods. Since 2006, DEC has been collaborating with the United Neighborhood Houses and The After-School Corporation to run ASCC.

The mission of ASCC is to educate and foster a sense of stewardship in underserved, inner-city children involved in elementary after-school programs. In contrast to the stereotype that nature cannot exist in a city, this program teaches children to appreciate the environment surrounding them and better understand their place within it. The program currently has more than ten sites throughout the five boroughs of New York City and will expand in the future.

The ASCC program is two-fold. Over the course of ten weeks, it engages students through fun, interactive lessons where they learn about conservation, New York State's natural resources, and important ecological concepts. Among other activities, students dissect owl pellets, play bird migration and food chain games, fish, learn about watersheds, study tree rings, and challenge their observation skills. Some even take field trips to further expand their understanding of

their local environment. Students also participate in journal writing, which provides an opportunity to reflect on their experiences. Perhaps most importantly, sometimes nature is where you least expect to find it.

The program's stewardship projects have been quite successful. For instance, Riverdale Neighborhood House in the Bronx has reclaimed a vacant lot between their community center and the neighboring school. They removed the garbage in the area, posted anti-littering signs, built three flower beds, and started an on-site compost bin. Similarly, Lenox Neighborhood Houses, a former ASCC site, planted native plants in containers on a roof top in Manhattan. Most ASCC sites have recycling programs at their locations. Notably, teachers have observed that children involved with ASCC have made changes in their attitudes and behavior after participating.

One of the most successful of the stewardship programs has been the butterfly gardens, set up at more than ten different sites. A butterfly garden hosts native plant species that attract butterflies and other pollinators, such as beetles, bees, flies and ants. It may even attract some birds, such as the ruby-throated hummingbird! Most importantly, students loved working in the butterfly gardens. One fourth grader at the Riverdale Neighborhood House said, "It makes me feel like I did something to help our community. We took a place that was filled with garbage and gave it more meaning." Student involvement in these gardens is

It makes me
feel like I did
something
to help our
community.



Jim Clayton

The ASCC's hands-on approach encourages kids to interact with each other and improve their environment.

particularly valuable because ASCC is multifaceted, ongoing, and shows children that humans are capable of making a positive impact on their environment, especially in their own neighborhoods.

However, none of these projects would exist without the cooperation of a number of volunteers and organizations. The program began as a collaborative effort among DEC, United Neighborhood Houses and The After-School Corporation, which worked together to develop an after-school component at sites caring for children after school hours. DEC's environmental educators developed a comprehensive, 10-week curriculum that includes educational activities, background information, and stewardship project guidance. Together with AmeriCorps members of the Student Conservation Association's Hudson Valley Conservation Corps, they trained site supervisors and counselors, providing them with the knowledge and skills needed to lead their groups. As the program's counselors are youth leaders themselves, the training allowed the senior environmental educators the opportunity to mentor the next generation of teachers.

Learning a number of new skills themselves, many of the trainees expressed the same sense of wonder that they would later see on the faces of the children in the ASCC. For example, one section taught counselors how to dissect regurgitated owl pellets, a new experience for most. Over the course of only a few minutes, the comments in the room shifted from "Ewww, do I have to pick this apart?" to "Hey, I found two jaw bones!"

Sometimes
nature is
where you
least expect
to find it.

Many organizations within the New York City area have supported the program. For instance, the Bronx Zoo drew on its unique resources to donate compost for the ASCC's gardens. The program also received free native plants through the New York City Butterfly Project's Plant Share program. The New York Restoration Project taught students how to make flower beds at the Riverdale site. Program leaders also worked with DEC's I FISH NY program to familiarize club participants with one of the most abundant natural resources in New York City: Fish. Funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and New York City Environmental Fund (NYCEF) of the Hudson River Foundation allowed the program to purchase key materials and equipment. Continued funding from NYCEF, the Levitt Foundation and HSBC Foundation allows more than 220 New York City children to participate in ASCC each fall and spring. This program would not be such a success without the cooperative effort of these and other organizations.

It is important for urban youth to learn about their local environment, and through learning, develop a sincere respect for it. Participation in the ASCC program is helping youngsters in New York City look at their landscape in a whole new way. By teaching that humans have the ability to both positively and negatively affect their environment, the program is inspiring the next generation of environmental leaders.

Angie Eddy is a former environmental educator for DEC and is now the proud mother of a 1-year-old.