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METROPOLITAN GREENSPACES EDUCATION GRANT
Friends of the Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge
Refuge Field Guide

SUMMARY AND EVALUATION

This is the (Final Report)

The Friends of the Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge (FOR) worked with fifth and sixth graders and educators from the Sherwood School District to produce a field guide to the Refuge. The guide was researched, written and edited by the students. It will be ready for publication in June, 2001.

This guide was written by the students and reflects the language and interests of the fifth and sixth graders who contributed to it. It is geared toward families who might enjoy a Sunday afternoon on the Refuge. Therefore, it is not a detailed, scientific document, but one that will answer a question such as "Mom, what is that big bird?"

This project began in January of 2000. Frank Luzaich, fifth grade teacher from Archer Glen Elementary; Debbie Frankel, sixth grade science teacher from Sherwood Middle School; and Janet Bechtold, from the District Talented and Gifted Program collaborated to begin work on the field guide.

In the first year of the grant cycle, about 100 fifth and sixth graders worked together on the initial planning of how the guide would look and what would be included in it. It took a lot of planning time among the teachers to design this piece of the project. It meant combining fifth and sixth graders into interest group – birds, mammals, amphibians, etc. – and organizing time schedules and transportation to get them all to one school to work together. Because the project was student-directed, student project managers and group leaders were appointed. These students met outside of the large group to help arrange field trips to the Refuge and to organize all the field equipment each group used while collecting data during field trips. They made sure all equipment was in order before each trip and were responsible for it in the field.

In the first year, the students visited the Refuge six times for about an hour and a half each time. The students had a checklist of activities they were responsible for performing while doing the fieldwork. It took a while to get their attention focused on the work at hand. The Refuge is a child's outdoor dreamscape and catching frogs and grasshoppers and getting stuck in the mud tended to pull them away from their tasks at first. Also, there were 50 to 60 students out on the Refuge at one time and even with parents and three teachers on hand, there were some management issues.

One of the ways we found to bring the students attention back to collecting usable data was to have expert ornithologists, botanists, biologists and herpetologists come help us. We had an "Expert Day" at Middle School where each group met for a class period with an expert in their field to explain how to collect data and do field work. Most of those

“experts” joined us for our next field trip and accompanied the same groups in the field. This was a powerful way to get the students on track for their fieldwork.

Toward the end of the school year, we developed cards that became a template for transferring field notes to entries for the filed guide. Students were responsible to prepare these cards using their field notes, reference books, and the Internet. We collected cards from every group – birds, amphibians, marine life, reptiles, mammals, insects, and trees and plants.

We met during the following summer to decide how to proceed with the field guide in the next school year. We had a deadline of June 2001 to produce the finished copy. As we thought about the writing and editing process, we realized it would be very difficult to accomplish with the large number of students we worked with the previous year.

Somehow we had to pull together a dedicated, knowledgeable group of student writers and editors. We came up with the idea of an after-school Refuge Club. This group would continue to visit the Refuge while they analyzed and distilled the data collected by the large group. They would be our core group of writers and editors.

We did some research on after-school groups that showed that a group of 15 to 20 worked best. We sent applications for Refuge Club out to all sixth and seventh grade science classes, hoping that some students who had been involved in the previous year would apply. We attached some criteria to the application and accepted 16 of the 20 or so who applied. We ended up with a group who had self-selected to work on the guide. Two students dropped out, one moved from the area, but the rest remained faithful.

The Refuge staff helped us determine if our species lists correctly reflected what was on the Refuge. The field trips helped the students to refine and test the information gathered the previous year. Experts visited Refuge Club meetings to help them with the final copy. We were very fortunate to have Arlan Madsen, a member of the Friends of the Refuge and former president of Audubon, join us at nearly every meeting. He was an invaluable information resource and a wonderful mentor for the students.

Our students manned a table at the Migratory Bird Day Celebration at the Refuge on May 19. They had rough draft copies of the guide as well as photos that chronicled their work. They did a wonderful job talking to the public about the Refuge and the field guides. They were very well received and we got a lot of great feedback on the guide.

Refuge Club members also took the guide on a “road test”. We brought Frank Luzaich’s fifth grade class out to the Refuge with our Club members during the school day. We had draft copies of the guide available for each fifth grader. We broke them into groups and Refuge Club members acted as their guides for a tour of the Refuge. We wanted the fifth grader’s feedback on how the guide actually worked in the field. It was a very successful test. The younger students were able to use the guide to identify creatures and plants on the Refuge. Our Club members were the consummate guides; friendly, knowledgeable, yet firm about following the basic rules – such as staying on the paths, etc. We were quite amazed to see how maturely they behaved. Some of these students were the same ones stuck in the mud last year! What a great day!

Our guide is on the way to the printer as I write this, after many, many edits. Our last Refuge Club meeting was a party for the kids and their parents and our last trip to the Refuge for the year. During this meeting we talked about plans for Refuge Club for next year. The focus for next year is stewardship, leadership, and presentation skills training. We hope that the Refuge Club members will become spokespeople for the Refuge. They will do presentations to various community groups to introduce the Refuge and the field guides to the public.

At this time, the Refuge is only open to the general public a few times a year. Our Refuge Club members and their parents have probably spent more time on the Refuge than anyone except Refuge staff. In the process, they came to love the Refuge and gained a true understanding of stewardship. We hope to strengthen that understanding and draw even more students in next year to continue this work.

What worked and what didn't? What tips do we have for future project managers? The first tip would be to do a reality check when you have "this great idea"! We really had no idea how much work this would be. We had to remain very flexible, as the enormity of what we'd taken on became apparent. Planning time was of the essence – YOU CAN NOT DO A PROJECT OF THIS SIZE AND DURATION WITHOUT IT! Most grants will not pay for subs to allow teachers this time, but it is essential to a project like this.

We found we really needed to balance class time with time in the field. The kids needed to be "out there" to keep up their enthusiasm for this project. It was a long time to keep the attention of middle schoolers.

Deciding on an after-school program was crucial to finishing the project. We used all of our transportation money the first year because we were transporting large groups of kids to the Refuge. The after-school group was transported by parents at no cost.

The grant included money to hire a graphic designer. We were very fortunate to have a teacher in our school with graphic design experience. Hiring him made our job lots easier. He was able to come to our Refuge Club meetings and was available throughout the school day for consultation.

While this has been an all-consuming project, especially in the final few months of the grant cycle, it has also been enormously rewarding for us all: students, teachers and parents. We consider this the "first edition" of the field guide. We are already figuring out how to make it better next time. This project will be apart of our teaching and personal lives for a long time to come.