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How Sound is it?

Students check into health of coastal waters

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Kathleen O'Rourke/Staff photos

Joshua Gil, 7, and Yasser Campos, 8, third-graders at Davenport Ridge Elementary School, peer into an aquarium during the SoundWaters Island Explorer's Program at the SoundWaters Coastal Center.

STAMFORD — Dozens of third-graders scampered along the shore of Long Island Sound, turning over rocks, pawing at the sand and occasionally picking up bits of living treasures hidden in the beach sand.

They filled plastic containers with small Asian shore crabs and slipper shells, or hard-shell snails that sometimes grow on top of each other in a stack, with the one on the bottom turning female when it's time to reproduce.

"Try to find as many living creatures as you can," said the instructor, Dione Clinkenbeard, who gave them an extra jolt of motivation by breaking the class into two teams: boys and girls.

She and other instructors from the environmental education group SoundWaters used nature as a classroom last week to teach the children about the coastal environment and the human impact on it.

A week after getting in-class lessons from the SoundWaters instructors, the 50 third-graders from Davenport Ridge Elementary School went to the group's Cove Island Park headquarters for hands-on learning.

SoundWaters is a Stamford-based nonprofit environmental organization.

This is SoundWaters' second year of taking its program to all elementary schools in Stamford, said Kathy Rhodes, the group's director of education. The lessons, which fit into the schools' science curriculum, are funded by grants from the Education Foundation of America, the Oaklawn Foundation and others.

The students started out at SoundWaters headquarters, learning characteristics of a salt marsh — an "in-between" habitat where the land and water meet, instructor Callie Gecewicz said. Above, suspended from the ceiling, was a model of a great blue heron, with its long legs for walking in shallow water and a long beak for picking out fish.

The children mimicked the bird outside, at Gecewicz's instruction, as they tiptoed into the tall cordgrass at the water's edge so they could run their fingers along a blade of grass and taste it.

Michael Faugno, 8, looks for crabs.

"Is this powder?" said one student, Alexa Baer. "It tasted like salt."

She was right, Gecewicz said — the grass, caught between the land and the sea, perspires just like the children do in gym class to rid itself of salt from the ocean.

"Plants here are pretty special" to live in the mixed habitat, she said.

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Next, she brought out a small model, fitted into a rectangular plate, to show the dangers of pollution. At her prompting, a student poured purple food coloring onto the green clay mound representing the land. Another poured water onto it, representing rain and the "ocean" painted onto the bottom of the plate was instantly besmirched with a long plume of purple.

"Would you want to eat a fish that was swimming in that water?" she said, to replies of "No" and "No way."

She told them the marsh is a spongy area that soaks up pollution before it leaks into the water, illustrating her point with a pair of sponges that a student nestled next to the "land."

Next stop was the beach where they gathered the Asian shore crabs and slipper shells. One stack of slipper shells was growing on a soft drink can.

"See how animals in Long Island Sound adapt to their habitat?" Clinkenbeard said.

"Long Island Sound is actually way healthier than people think," she said, noting the abundance of life the students found.

One purpose of the program is to counteract misperceptions about the Sound, especially the idea that it's too polluted and not worth cleaning up, Rhodes said.

"Hopefully by telling (the students) about the animals that live in the Sound, they'll want to protect the Sound as a habitat for these animals," she said.