

E3: Kids learn that they really can make a change

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This year marks the second of the program's three-year theme, focusing on conservation. Habitat conservation is the focus for this summer.

"We have no textbook or curriculum," Wolff said. "It's hands on, it's fun, it's energetic for kids," Wolff added.

Monarch butterflies, milkweed and the lady slipper are just a few things the students are striving to preserve. Through taking measurements and graphing data, the students learn about a variety of topics that are centered around what they can do locally.

According to Wolff, the teachers ask high-level, open-ended questions that make the students think and encourage cu-



Colby Banks, 10, looks out over a garden of milkweed plants his class has tended over the past couple weeks with the Project E3 program at I.J. Holton Intermediate School Wednesday morning. Alex Smith/alex.smith@austindailyherald.com

rosity in what they are learning about. The teachers also share with the students important background information that supports activities that promote deeper learning. He hopes this

encourages the students to become "citizen scientists" and solve problems. This program promotes going outside and giving the kids the opportunity to learn and experience themselves.

Ten-year-olds Phoebe Holst and Erin Boorsma of Albert Lea are experiencing their first summer at Project E3.

"I liked going outside and writing," Phoebe said. "I agree, but I also like

going in the garden during the day and working on plants," Erin added.

Phoebe and Erin are just two of the 75 students currently participating in Project E3. The program looks at the student's academic performance, as well as their potential to continue to achieve.

"We find kids that have the potential and we give them extra support," Wolff said.

For 10-year-old Dejan Tadic of Austin, it's been amazing learning about habitat conservation by going outside and doing things themselves.

"I'm studying my plant and how much it's grown over a week. I'm making observations if there's any animals on it and we're watering it after all of that," Dejan said.

The program not only

offers a fun and different experience, but it's also been shown to improve the student's cumulative test scores. Wolff said students participating in Project E3 slow the decline in their test scores from the spring to the fall, otherwise known as the "summer slide."

Through unique teaching mechanisms and academic opportunities, Project E3 encourages students to be advocates not only for their environment, but for their community. Next year, Project E3 will focus on energy conservation.

"They can leave with the idea that they are citizen scientists. They can make a change," Wolff said.

For more information, visit www.projecte3.weebly.com.

Minnesota prairie restorers recruit a surprising ally: cows

Records say when the first plows sliced through the great Midwestern prairie, a popping sound rang through the air like a volley of pistol shots. It was the sound of millions of roots snapping against the plow's steel blade.

Vast tallgrass prairie once covered about a third of Minnesota's landscape. But less than 2 percent of that native grassland remains, much of it plowed under for agricultural use.

"The places where you still have prairie and grass, are places where it was very difficult, or unprofitable to farm," Steve Chaplin, prairie conservation coordinator for Minnesota and Dakotas for the nonprofit Nature Conservancy, said he stood on a stretch of prairie outside Moorhead.

Now, though, state agencies and private conservation groups are pushing ahead on plans to preserve tracts land -- and cattlemen and their cows are playing a surprisingly important role.

Preserving prairie has meant figuring out ways to mimic certain elements of the environment before settlers moved in. Conser-

vationists say cattle can mimic much of the grazing patterns of bison, which once covered the prairie and whose presence was vital to the ecosystem.

"We, the conservation community in general, have been saying cows and conservation don't work together," said Greg Hoch, prairie habitat team leader for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. "After further research ... we've figured out cows and conservation can work very very well together."

Cattle are not a perfect proxy for bison, as the animals have different styles of grazing. For one, cattle are more preferential to certain plants. And bison would tend to graze an area very intensely, only to leave for long periods of time, sometimes years. So land managers have to carefully track the duration and intensity of cattle grazing to best model historic conditions.

The DNR and other conversation groups have been working for the past several years to forge relationships with cattlemen nearby to grasslands.

Contracts between land managers and ranchers can vary from case to case,

but typically no money changes hands, Hoch said. Ranchers must agree to stipulations around land use, and Hoch emphasized the benefits observed on the land, including im-

provements to plant and wildlife health and diversity.

Land managers can turn to controlled burns or mowing to provide some of the same benefits as cat-

tle grazing, but these tools have certain drawbacks and limitations.

Grant Breikreutz, a leader in the Minnesota Cattlemen's Association who raises cattle in south-

west Minnesota, said he's been satisfied with his experience grazing DNR land over the past several years. But he said it's been hard to watch how slow the program is growing overall.

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