

IISG Fosters Community Stewardship through University Students

By Jason Peterson

Robert Nagel listened proudly as a local elementary student confidently described the problems of aquatic invasive species, a special topic his class had been studying. "I just thought, 'wow!' I realized at that moment how much he had learned," Nagel said.



U of I students gathered at a Community Stewardship Fair to present their projects. Michael Kudia shows off a monster-sized sea lamprey created by grade school students.

Nagel is not a teacher, an education major, or even a close relative of the knowledgeable student. Rather, he is a Germanic languages and literature major at the University of Illinois who happened to stumble upon a flyer for a new service-learning course entitled *Community Stewardship through Environmental Education*. Four months later, Nagel found himself directly impacting the environment, the community, and a group of kids he had never met before this year.

Throughout the course Nagel experienced two unique styles of learning that university classes do not typically offer. "In addition to academics, the class is focused on meaningful service with the community and purposeful civic learning," he said.

"Service-learning is a form of experiential education in which learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection," said Valeri Werpetski, education specialist at the U of I Center for Teaching Excellence. "In this process, students work with others to apply what they learn to address community problems, and, at the same time, reflect on their experience."

Nagel and other students in the course brought the issue of aquatic invasive species to local schools, spending two hours each week in the classroom teaching 4th, 5th, and 7th grade students from four Champaign and Urbana schools. These student leaders used a science-based web

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Staff Update

IISG Welcomes New Research Coordinator

John Epifanio, IISG's new research coordinator, is no stranger to the program. Early in his career, he was IISG's very first Knauss fellow. Since 2001, he has been a molecular ecologist at the Illinois Natural History Survey (INHS). There, Epifanio has served in a number of administrative roles, including director of the Center for Aquatic Ecology.

Epifanio splits his time between IISG and INHS. As research coordinator, he helps identify areas of science and research that address key coastal issues, oversees allocation of IISG research dollars, and works with researchers to connect their research to impact. Epifanio earned his doctorate from the University of Illinois.



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site—Nab the Aquatic Invader! (www.sgnis.org/kids)—to effectively introduce and instill in the children the importance of this topic.

"The web site provides a creative way to learn about invasive species," said Robin Goettel, Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant (IISG) associate director for education. "Through colorful cartoon characters and a crime-fighting theme the site conveys how invasive species are transported to local waters, their adaptations, impacts and how they can be controlled."

At the end of the course, the student leaders helped the children compile their work into community stewardship projects. The children presented their topics through different mediums such as display boards, activity books, calendars, and skits, according to Werpetski.

To accomplish this, students met with representatives from libraries, park districts, nature centers, and other organizations to form community partnerships. The community partners provided resources for the children to put their projects together, and in return, they will use the projects in future teaching efforts.

"I've never taken a class before that necessitates reaching out to the community as one of the project requirements," said Nagel. "This helped me learn more about how to network. I also learned more about what the community has to offer."

Nineteen students participated in the class last spring and 25 this year. According to Goettel, about half of the students have been natural resource majors, while the other half represented other majors such as history, engineering, and literature. "But they all have a strong interest in environmental stewardship," she said. "And some had previous experience working with kids."

"This year we went beyond just using the 'Nab' web site, and provided an active learning component that incorporated more interactive, science-based activities," said Terri Hallesy, IISG education specialist. "By providing concrete learning experiences that are hands-on and engaging, students were able to teach school children about the serious issue of aquatic invasive species in a more meaningful and enriching manner."