

Local News

Working for scale:

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Eric Fernau, an eighth-grader at Upton Middle School, looks at the young salmon he is about to release Wednesday into Mill Creek in Flaherty Park in Watervliet. About 80 eighth-graders at Upton Middle School took part in the Salmon in the Classroom project, offered through the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and with the financial support of the Southwest Michigan Steelheaders and Fifth Third Bank. Students started with around 160 salmon eggs in the fall, and about half survived. They will make their way to Lake Michigan and will eventually return to the creek to spawn. John Madill / H-P staff

Upton Middle School students release 80 salmon they raised from eggs into creek

By **JOHN MATUSZAK - H-P Staff Writer**

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WATERVLIET - It takes a village to raise a fish.

That was apparent Wednesday, as Upton Middle School eighth-graders released fingerling Chinook salmon into Mill Creek in Watervliet, the culmination of a year-long project that involved numerous community partners.

"Ann and Jenna have a passion, and it kind of rubbed off on the kids," Upton Principal Chad Mandarin said as about 80 students braved chilly temperatures, waiting to release the salmon they had raised from eggs since fall. "It's contagious."

Mandarino was referring to Ann St. Amand, president of PhycoTech, a company that monitors water quality, and Jennifer Francis, the teacher team leader for the Salmon in the Classroom project, offered through the Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

This was the first year for Salmon in the Classroom at Upton. It is run in about 100 schools in Michigan, which have to apply to participate.

St. Amand has supervised the UpStream program for St. Joseph's sixth-graders since 2005, teaching about the importance of maintaining clean water.

"This is UpStream with fish," St. Amand said at Flaherty Park in Watervliet, where the two-and-a-half-inch long salmon were released into a tributary of the Paw Paw River.

In two to three weeks, the salmon will make their way to Lake Michigan, she told the students. Eventually, using their sense of smell, they will return to the same spot where they were released to spawn, completing their life cycle.

Superintendent Al Skibbe suggested that St. Amand and the Upton teachers look into the Salmon in the Classroom project.

The project requires a year-long commitment to monitor water quality and keep the tanks clean as the fish grow.

It also required around \$1,500 for the equipment and tanks. St. Amand turned to the Southwest Michigan Steelheaders, a sports fishermen's group, which contributed to the effort.

Other sponsors included Topspot4salmon, operated by tournament fishers Winn and Angie Wolf of St. Joseph; and Fifth Third Bank, through Randy Reimers, the bank's community president and treasurer of the St. Joseph school board.

Jim Marohn, vice president of the local Steelheaders chapter of the Michigan Steelheaders Salmon Fishermen's Association, said the educational component fits in with the organization's mission to promote fishing.

Sport fishing is a \$1 billion industry for Michigan, Marohn said. "People from the Pacific Northwest come here to fish for salmon."

The Steelheaders further sponsor Salmon in the Classroom in Hartford schools and at Countryside Academy. The chapter plans to expand the program at Upton next year so that all eighth-graders can participate, Marohn said.

Deep thinking

The students have enjoyed the hands-on learning experience, Francis said. "They've really taken ownership."

Loud expressions of enthusiasm showed that the students were enjoying the work more than a typical textbook lesson.

The project started with about 160 salmon eggs, and about 80 survived, which the DNR considered impressive for the first year, Francis said.

The kids did get attached to their charges, Mandarino said. "They took it personally every time a fish died."

Francis credited St. Amand with the high survival rate, particularly in the final weeks when the tanks needed cleaning every day. St. Amand also kept an eye on things during school breaks and weekends.

The water had to be kept at 51 degrees Fahrenheit, which was difficult during the period when outside temperatures were in the 80s, St. Amand said.

It was a learning experience for St. Amand, who admitted she had more expertise with algae than fish.

For one thing, she discovered that it takes a lot of ammonia lock - a kind of kitty litter for fish - to keep the tanks clean.

"Turns out all baby fish do is pee and poop," St. Amand found out.

Student Eric Ferman said he enjoyed watching the fish grow, and collecting daily data on water quality. The kids watched the markings change from stripes to spots, which will help the fish hide from predators.

Interest in science has "exploded" in St. Joseph schools because of projects such as this and Upstream, Mandarino said. "St. Joseph kids love science."

The Paw Paw River was selected because it is cold and clean, Marohn said. The St. Joseph River gets a lot of run-off from farms and is warmer and has more silt, he said.

The fish couldn't just be dumped into their new habitat. They had to be carefully acclimated. Water from the stream was periodically added to the cups held by the students, to get the fish accustomed to the temperature change.

St. Amand urged the students to be gentle as the fish were released. "I've already stressed the heck out of them by moving them from the tanks to the buckets."

After releasing the salmon, students looked through water samples for bugs, a food source for fish, and looked at algae under microscopes. They also calculated the surface velocity of the water using flow meters, along with ping pong balls and a stop watch.

It has been St. Amand's mission to teach students about the importance of clean water.

"We're dependent on it," she emphasized. "You can live without food for weeks, but you can only live without water for a few days."

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