

Como Park High School students have a Field Day – November 11, 2007

October's many days of cloudy wet weather (combined with the shorter days) made me as slow as a slug. However, after the sky finally cleared my energy rose as high as Como Lake's water level.

A strong west wind was whipping the last of the leaves off the backyard trees and blowing them straight into the mulch pile; I had put off raking and now my procrastination was being rewarded.

By late October, the arc of the sun at noon drops below 35 degrees; slanting light shines deep into the once hidden woods of the park. A muted tapestry of burgundy, ochre, and yellow leaf litter covers the forest floor. That familiar fall aroma fills the air as I kick up the decaying leaves. On this autumn day, the temperature was reaching for the high 60s; mighty fine weather for earthworms, mushrooms, and students of nature.

The woods are usually rather quiet in the fall. However, along with the noisy bike path construction, buckthorn busts and an educational field day enlivened the typically somber woodlands.

Removing piles of invasive buckthorn shrubs from the woods is hard, but satisfying work. On October 27, over 165 volunteers came to Como Park to do just that, and most of the volunteers were teenagers. Como Park High School students are turning out to be the real local heroes of Como Park's woodland restoration efforts, but they are putting in more than one day a year for the benefit of the park's woodlands. The students have embarked on a long-term ecological research project to measure changes in the Como Woodland during the restoration process.

On the morning of October 4, two classes of advanced placement juniors and seniors from Como Park High School came together with 20 adult volunteers to take part in the first Field Day for the Como Woodland Education project. The project will span many years, and future science students will build on the data and knowledge acquired by these kids.

"Every long journey starts with a single step" and that is what the October 4th Field Day was. The students had been practicing how to use the equipment (like global positioning system units). And they had already done classroom studies on the basic science concepts such as biodiversity, ecological succession, and invasive species impacts. Nevertheless, such concepts are best understood when applied in the real world.

The 61 students were divided into small study groups and were given an adult mentor to help them with their field data collection. At the Como Woodland site, each group was assigned their study plot in the woodland. The student study groups will track changes at their woodland plots until next May. Each group was also asked to formulate a study question that their group would investigate in detail over the coming months.

The volunteer mentors generously shared their time and scientific expertise with the teenagers. These volunteers came from the University of Minnesota, Ramsey Conservation District, USDA Forestry Department, St. Paul Audubon Society, St. Paul City Environmental Services, and the Native Plant Society. And who knows – perhaps a few hours spent mentoring today might motivate a curious youngster to choose a career in the sciences tomorrow.



According to the Como Park High School students' science teacher, Josh Leonard, "It is rare today that a small group of students can get such direct instruction for any extended period of time – this is important for their social acculturation in addition to their scientific understanding." Spoken like a true scientist, but I'll translate: Kids pay closer attention and learn more when the mentor/student ratio is 1 to 4.

And the kids remember what they've learned because of the apt outdoor setting.

One of the study groups found several jelly fungi (common name: yellow brain jelly). Their mentor, Chase Davis, brought back the fungi for the rest of us to examine. Giant exploding puffballs, smelly stinkhorns, and slimy gilled mushrooms are not the most attractive things in the woods. But, this quivering blob of jelly was down right nasty. And we still had to do an earthworm count!

After lunch, the study groups and mentors went back to their plots to perform an earthworm analysis. The students poured mustard water over a one square-foot area within each of their plots, and a large variety of worms came slithering to the surface to escape the irritating fluid.

Josh Leonard later told me that the students claimed to be utterly disgusted by the earthworm analysis. Yet many of the research questions the kids chose to pursue over the next six months seemed to involve subjects with a high yuck factor, like earthworms and fungi . . . I wonder why? But that may be a research question for a future class of Como Park High School science students.

By Deb Robinson
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