

Media Alert—For Immediate Release
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“Valley Stewardship Network and Kickapoo area students get their hands and feet wet in the name of science”

Mussels are animals with shells. They are unable to see and are silent creatures, never making any noise or sound. They spend almost their entire lives partially or completely buried in sand and gravel bottoms of streams, rivers, and even lakes and ponds. Mussels rarely move more than a few hundred yards in their entire juvenile and adult life, and some mussels can live up to 10, 20, 30—even 100 years old! As such, monitoring the presence of mussels can give us a clue as to healthy or degraded a river or stream that historically supported mussels is, and sheds light on how clean our water resources are here in Wisconsin.

There are around 1,000 different kinds of freshwater mussels, and almost 300 species live in North America. Today, however, only about 1/3 of all freshwater mussel species still exist. Many factors have contributed to the decline of mussels including the presence of invasive species such as Zebra mussels, habitat alteration, pollution, and overharvesting practices of the past. In Wisconsin alone, 28 mussel species are listed as threatened, endangered, special concern or species of greatest conservation need.

In conjunction with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, the Valley Stewardship Network (VSN) hosted two mussel monitoring initiatives for students to literally “get their hands and feet wet” in the name of science. Mussel monitoring involves wading in safe, shallow areas of a waterway, feeling along the sandy or rocky river bottoms, taking pictures if they are living or collecting empty shells, and sending this all to the Wisconsin DNR for analysis. Mussel biologists use this protocol as well, but are also able to conduct surveys by scuba diving.

VSN staff worked with WDNR staff, Lisie Kitchel and John Paul White, Nathan Eckert of the Genoa Fish Hatchery and Paul Hayes, long-time VSN volunteer water monitor and retired biology teacher, to coordinate and accomplish two mussel monitoring events for both the Kickapoo Homeschool Cooperative students and the entire Youth Initiative High School located in Viroqua, WI. Between both events, participants ranged in ages from 7-18, and many parents and school staff joined in as well for a total of nearly 70 participants.

Eleven species of freshwater mussels were found in total on the Wisconsin River between Sauk City and Mazomanie, WI, as well as the Mississippi River near DeSoto, WI. Although invasive Zebra mussels were found on some of the native mussels, students also located a few federally endangered mussel species including Higgins' Eye. Other mussel species that caught the attention of the students include the Threeridge, Giant Floater, Washboard, Pocketbook and Heelsplitter.

Rice Spann, Kickapoo Homeschool Cooperative Coordinator reaffirms the success of the mussel hunt as he states,

“...the kids were thrilled to be turned loose on the knee deep mud flat feeling for mussels with their feet. It was a fun scavenger hunt, and they found a great variety of wild mussels, some fairly rare. Overall it was a wonderful time and a valuable lesson in how each species (even the ones hidden in the mud) plays a part in a healthy ecosystem.”

To learn more about the “Mussel Monitoring Program of Wisconsin”, go to <http://wiatri.net/inventory/mussels/> in your web browser for more information.

Want clean water? Become a volunteer water monitor! Contact Katya Leonard at vsnkatya@gmail.com, (608) 637-3615 and check out Valley Stewardship Network at <http://kickapoovsn.org> for more information on upcoming monitoring events.

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