



Field of Study

For high schoolers in Childress, there's no classroom Like the outdoors

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Here in the heart of farm and ranch country, prairie dogs traditionally are regarded as pests, and the word "environmentalist" is often an insult.

Even so, high school students here plan to import a couple dozen of the furry nuisances to populate part of an 88-acre wildlife area owned and operated by the Childress Independent School District. The land, which the district purchased 18 months ago with a \$48,000 grant from a nonprofit foundation, is managed by students as part of the school's ambitious wildlife-management program.

Educators and conservationists say they've never seen a project quite like it. Students are responsible for everything from restoring habitats and building nature trails to conducting research.

"It was a brave undertaking for this particular group of students to take on that level of responsibility," says Vicki Sybert, regional interpretive specialist for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, which works with the district. "Here we have not just some theoretical classroom experience going on - this is real life, real dollars, real management, real animals."

'I just like wildlife'

Hands-on experience is what agriculture-science teacher Russell Graves had in mind when he launched the effort three years ago. A professional nature photographer, Mr. Graves says that viewing wildlife in its native habitat changed his perspective on life, and he wants to give his students that same experience.

"I'm not an environmentalist," he says. "I just like wildlife."

Whether his students go on to work as bankers or farmers "doesn't matter to me," he says, "as long as they recognize their role as stewards of wildlife."

The wildlife training is part of the district's agriculture-science program, which still offers some traditional "cows and plows" courses. One recent day, students were grilled on their ability to tell a Rhode Island Red chicken from a white leghorn. The program began emphasizing wildlife management when Mr. Graves arrived 10 years ago.

The emphasis makes sense in today's rural economy, Mr. Graves says, because "ecotourism" activities, such as hunting and bird-watching, are increasingly important revenue sources for landowners.

When it comes to selecting a research project, he says, he wants to know how it could benefit people.

Student projects are impressive, Ms. Sybert says. They have included such topics as "The Effect of Negative Cover on Survivability of Bobwhite Quail Nests" and "The Effect of Water Placement on Cattle Grazing."

Classwork involves everything from clearing brush and planting native grasses to banding quail with radio transmitters and tracking their movements with global-positioning technology.

Jim Self, 23, a graduate of Childress schools who teaches agriculture science about 70 miles away in Wheeler, says that enrolling in the program was "one of the best things I ever did," even though news of prairie-dog research caused tension at home.

He grew up in a farm family, and "every time we saw a prairie dog poke its head up, we pretty well did away with him." So when his grandfather "found out I was doing prairie-dog studies, it was a long Thanksgiving and Christmas, let me tell you that," he says.

Relatives still aren't fond of the animal, which burrows underground and pockmarks the land with holes, but they support the Childress wildlife program because of how much students learn, Mr. Self says.

Prairie-dog research is carried out on private property just outside Childress, but plans call for introducing some rodents to the new wildlife area this fall from Lubbock, which is relocating the animals from city land.

Finding the money

The Childress wildlife area was purchased in 2002 after Mr. Graves, who is tireless in soliciting grants for the school, approached the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation about funding.

Dick Davis, director of the foundation's division for Texas and Oklahoma, says his organization liked the idea. "One of our funding

priorities is to support the next generation of stewards," he says, "so we're looking for exactly this kind of project."

Many school districts own small parcels of land for laboratories or barns, and many offer wildlife-management courses, says Terry Phillips, program director of agriculture science and technology for the Texas Education Agency. Some districts even boast environmental centers. But buying and managing significant acreage for nature studies is "carrying this another step."

Thanks to the foundation grant, student labor and donated materials, the cost to the district - the only school system in the county - has been minimal. School board president Steve Bird says the board voted unanimously in favor of the project.

City Manager Jerry Cummins says residents are equally enthusiastic. "We hope there's a lot of people that will come up there and stop and look, then come on into town and have lunch and maybe spend the night," he says. "We think it might be good for tourism."

Such a project would be ambitious for any district, but Childress is small, relatively poor and geographically isolated. The district has 1,200 students, almost half of whom are classified as "economically disadvantaged." The closest major cities are Amarillo and Wichita Falls, each about 100 miles away

"It might be too ambitious for the urban places," Mr. Cummins says of the responsibility shouldered by students, "but out in the country you do it like that - whatever it takes."

Students say practical experience is one of the program's biggest lures. "It gets you out of the classroom and gets you doing something else than listening to lectures and doing worksheets," says senior Amy Inman, 17. "People that have never gotten the opportunity to drive a tractor, for instance, get to do that."

The program is elective but is unusually popular, says superintendent John Wilson. About half of the high school's 320 students are enrolled in it. Most of those students take agriculture-science courses all four years.

Community recognition also means a lot to the kids, who have brought home dozens of state and area titles from agriculture-science fairs. "Everybody's really supportive," Amy says. "It kind of gives people a different look at what we do here in school, and it's not just athletics that is in the paper."

Mr. Graves even erected a sign on the side of the high school that proclaims "Childress FFA Home of Champions."

Amanda Browning, a 16-year-old sophomore, says the class "helped me talk to my dad," who is a full-time rancher. After Amanda and fellow student Alayna Siebman won a national title for a project on prescribed burning, she offered her dad some suggestions.

"He actually takes my advice," she marvels.

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