



Dirt Time

by Joan Regan, Tina Morris, and Betsy DeVries

The Ninth Grade program this year opened with a viewing of *An Inconvenient Truth* and closed with the students having contributed to the creation of a Web site on sustainability at Pike. In between those technological bookends the students put in some 'dirt time'. Dirt time is tracker jargon for time spent outdoors, studying the natural world first-hand and up close. Most young people today can name every car on the road, and most of the music on their ipods from the first bar, but they cannot distinguish among trees, or among shrubs, or even between shrubs and vines. It is just all the same: a green blur. Tracking teaches an ancient art of seeing. Sometimes one has to look at the ground for a long time before seeing what is there.

Clearly, tracking mammals or even birds has a limited use in the twentieth century. However, tracking teaches observation. A doctor studies an x-ray to see the details that tell the story. An accountant studies spread sheets to find in the details the story on income and expense. A novelist studies his or her words to see if the story told is authentic. A historian looks at artifacts to understand societies. The outdoor education portion of the Ninth Grade year

supports both the biology course and the advisor program by observing and experiencing the natural world.

In conjunction with the advisor program, the Ninth Grade biology course uses an ecological approach in its curriculum. In the fall term, Ninth Graders study ecosystems and habitats, using the Pike woods as their outdoor laboratory. Each student has his or her own quadrant from which they collect data about species diversity, seasonal changes, and the effects of temperature, water, and light on vegetation distribution in a microenvironment. As they study the biology of organisms on a local level, the students are also applying those concepts to global issues like climate change, habitat destruction, and human population growth. Their trips to Camp Chewonki in Wiscasset, Maine, in September and February add to their experiences and exposure to different ecosystems at varying times of the year. Again in the spring, the Ninth Graders take to the outdoors in their study of animal behavior and evolution. This year they were able to go to the special Darwin exhibit at the Museum of Science, which gave them an in-depth look at the power

of observation and field research as seen through the eyes of Darwin and other evolutionary biologists. In May, the Ninth Grade visits the Parker River Wildlife Refuge where the students inspect a barrier beach ecosystem and do a field study of Canada goose breeding behavior.

The students visit the Maine and Parker River locations, as well as an old farm in Boxford, in pursuit of comparisons and contrasts. In each of those venues, tracks tell interesting stories. Nines exploring Pike's campus as trackers have discovered groundhog heaven and the locust trees where the red squirrels have left their messages. They have found the sign of red fox, fisher, and coyote.

A famous tracker, Mark Elbrock, sometimes imposes on himself the discipline of not leaving a spot until he has found 'the hair'-- not his hair of course, but the hair of some wild creature that had passed there. So far he has never had to leave a spot without finding 'the hair.' When a Ninth Grader comes down from his half hour solo on a windswept dune overlooking the Gulf of Maine in February with the wild mammal hair that he found, a memory has been made.

The Ninth Grade canoeing trip with Chewonki guides down the St Croix River along the border of Canada is the kick-off of the Ninth Grade advisor program in September. It also begins their renewed relationship with the natural world. In a culture where children can spend more time in a climate-controlled car, watching a movie of their choice, than they do in the woods, it can be hard to have a relationship with nature. In order to write meaningfully about sustainability by year's end, the student must have formed a relationship with nature during the course of the year. In outdoor education, we walk, we look, we explore, we see the stories. In biology we learn the terminology, the cycles, the groupings, and the interactions. In advisor we go outside to make memories, to explore the interconnections, and to find ourselves. The Nines go outside in every season. They know *a little* about how to handle themselves without the protection of the climate-controlled car.

From their canoes the students can look down and see that the floor of the St. Croix River is thick with cut logs that did not complete the journey when wood was delivered by river drives to the pulp mills around 1900. Coming full circle in the spring, the Nines visited the Waste Management plant in Lawrence where paper is sorted for recycling today. Because the students have personally seen and touched trees from the different perspectives—those of history, the red squirrel, the oxygen/ carbon dioxide cycle, recycling, antler rubs, and building cook fires on memorable trips-- they have begun a relationship with trees and nature. When they create their own cartoons and Web site, using the technology of today, they have personal experiences with wood, weather, and wildlife to inform that process. Tracking and knowledge of the natural world was the high technology of not so long ago. 🍂



Left: Raccoon tracks in the Pike woods. Top: A red fox captured by Pike's motion-sensitive camera. Right: Ninth Graders reading animal sign at Chewonki.