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Nature nurture: Collaborative effort connects children with the outdoors

By Shelley Widhalm
Loveland Reporter-Herald

Reporter-Herald/Jenny Sparks

Big Thompson Elementary School fifth-graders Rylee Burton, 10, left, and Seth Keck, 11, dump food scraps they collected over Wednesday's lunch period into a worm bin outside the school. The two worm wranglers collected more than 20 pounds of scraps for the bin.

As fifth-grader Seth Keck opened the lid of the composting bin, he told the worms inside to "rise and shine."

Seth and Rylee Burton, also a fifth-grader at Big Thompson Elementary School, had just spent the lunch hour Wednesday as the day's worm wranglers — a voluntary position rotated among third- to fifth-graders.

Wranglers help the other students sort their lunch scraps into compostable materials, recyclables and trash.

The wranglers weighed the compost — 22 pounds that day — and took it outside to the school's five composting bins.

"It's messy, but I'm used to a mess," said Rylee, who is 10.

To Learn More

For more information about the Children and Nature Connection of Northern Colorado, go to www.kidsnatureconnection.org.

As a school focused on nature and science, Big Thompson offers a variety of programs and activities that get kids outdoors and connected with nature and an on-site garden and a 4-acre outdoor education area that extends the classroom outside.

"We're providing them with opportunities to be outdoors and to learn about nature and science," said Kellie Bashor, principal at Big Thompson.

Marcella Wells, president and chief executive officer of Fort Collins-based consulting firm Wells Resources Inc., visited the school last month to tell parents about what organizations in Northern Colorado are doing to reconnect children with nature.

The Children and Nature Connection of Northern Colorado — a coalition of Northern Colorado agencies, organizations and individuals — advocates unstructured play time outdoors for children and provides information about places to go and things to do outside, while raising awareness of the benefits of getting children back to nature.

Too many children today have what Richard Louv, author of "Lost Child in the Woods," calls nature-deficit disorder, the physical, emotional and mental impacts that result from a lack of connection with nature and the outdoors, Wells said.

"Playscapes are shrinking because of urbanization," Wells said, adding that years ago, children could roam for miles but now have a play area reduced to the end of their driveways.

Wells pointed out the national shift to a more sedentary lifestyle, the doubling of youth obesity over the past three decades and the health problems associated with both.

"The good news is green exercise positively affects mental and physical health," Wells said.

Nature play can provide that exercise and other health benefits as well through the right ingredients, including finding the right kind of place where children can engage in unstructured play, get dirty and use their imaginations, Wells said.

"As a parent, you can provide time for green play. You have to block in time for the outdoors," she said. "Do what you already do, but do it outside."

Just how extensive the connection that youngsters and families in Larimer County have with the natural environment is being studied by the Larimer County Department of Natural Resources through money provided by Great Outdoors Colorado, which is supported by the Colorado Lottery.

Called the Great Outdoors Colorado Youth Families and the Outdoors Pilot, the study will identify the current levels of connectedness between families and the outdoors, any gaps and barriers that might prevent such connections and the opportunities for improving those connections.

Great Outdoors Colorado is providing up to $120,000 for the study, which will begin in mid-March and be completed in early spring 2012 by a consultant selected by the Department of Natural Resources.

The study's purpose is to inventory existing nature programs, identify what schools are doing to provide nature-based education and find ways to better coordinate existing services, said Rob Novak, education program coordinator for the Department of Natural Resources.

"We're hoping to create a series of maps (showing) where programs are effective and places where parents can take their kids," Novak said.

After the pilot is finished, Great Outdoors Colorado plans to replicate the study in other parts of the state, Novak said.

Boyd Lake State Park is one organization that already provides programs that connect children with nature, such as campfire programs on the area's wetlands, wildlife and history and special programs for school visits catered to what the students are studying.

"If we can establish a background of appreciating nature and appreciating our environment when they're school-age, that leads to good stewardship of our resources, hopefully for the long term," said Eric Grey, manager of the park.

Comments

It amazes me that unstructured outdoor play is being looked at as an innovation. That is all we did when I was a kid.

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Conservation pro connects with Legacy Land Trust

Former manager of the open lands program back in game after break

BY KEVIN DUGGAN • KevinDuggan@coloradoan.com • February 22, 2011

K-Lynn Cameron is returning to the land.

Cameron, former manager of the open-lands program in the Larimer County Department of Natural Resources, is back in the conservation game after an 18-month break.

Her new outlet for preserving land from development is Legacy Land Trust, a private, nonprofit conservation organization that works in Larimer, Weld and Jackson counties.

Cameron, who retired from Larimer County in June 2009, went to work for the agency in January as its director of conservation.

The position is being funded through a two-year grant from Great Outdoors Colorado, or GOCO.

Initially, she was not interested in the position because she didn't want to work full time. But a proposal that would allow her to work part time and mentor a staff member who would eventually take over the position was too much to resist, Cameron said.

"Being able to pass on information and mentor a young, upcoming leader is very exciting," she said.

With four staff members, the trust is considerably smaller and more flexible in doing its work than a governmental entity, she said. Decisions can be made much quicker.

Much of her work will entail sitting down with property owners and talking about the options for their land. The organization focuses much of its attention on agricultural land, said Ryan Boggs, executive director of Legacy Land Trust.

Placing a conservation easement on a property offers considerable federal and state tax breaks to the owner. It also ensures that the property will remain permanently open and undeveloped beyond its existing uses.

But it's also a deeply personal and private decision, Boggs said. In many cases, the land has been in families for generations.

Cameron's background with Larimer County and conservation will be a "tremendous" asset to the organization, he said.

"It's a huge benefit for the land trust to have her experience in conservation and working with the community," he said.

Legacy Land Trust is a private option for property owners who don't want to deal with a governmental entity, such as the natural resources departments of Larimer County or Fort Collins, he said.

The trust has easements on 113 properties covering more than 40,000 acres. Its long-range strategic plan calls for protecting 150,000 acres.

The trust is funded through financial support of its more than 700 members.

Property owners feel a deep attachment to their land, Cameron said, and appreciate the privacy the trust can offer in its transactions.

A farmer in Weld County she has begun talking to is an example, she said. The farm has been in his family more than 100 years.

"He wants to keep it as farmland forever," she said. "It's coming from the heart."

One of the trust's smallest holdings is an easement

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on 25 acres on the west side of Fort Collins that sits southwest of LaPorte Avenue and Overland Trail. The land connects to state-owned land on the west and south.

Owner Bernie Levinger said he was interested in the tax advantages of a conservation easement, but he also wanted to make sure the property is not divided in years to come.

The property includes a section of "woods" - large stands of towering trees along the Pleasant Valley and Lake Canal. Pasture on the site is used to graze horses.

Levinger, who has owned the land since 1989, said he has always appreciated the work Legacy Land Trust does.

"I've been a member for a long time," he said.

K-Lynn Cameron of the Legacy Land Trust stands in a property acquired by the land trust in Fort Collins. C ameron is formerly of the Larimer County Open Space.(V. Richard Haro/The Associated Press)

By the numbers

Legacy Land Trust
> 1993 - year the organization w as founded as the Larimer Land Trust
> 2001 - year the name w as changed to the Legacy Land Trust to reflect its broader mission
> 113 - properties on w hich the trust holds conservation easements
> 40,000 plus - acres protected
Information: w w w .legacylandtrust.org

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The Coloradoan, Sunday, February 27, 2011

Red Mountain Open Space reopens March 1

Larimer County's Red Mountain Open Space will reopen to the public Tuesday.

The 15,000-acre open space is located about 25 miles north of Fort Collins near the Wyoming border. It includes 8 miles of trails. It is closed Dec. 1 to March 1 due to winter conditions and to help protect habitat for big game animals.

To learn more about the property, visit www.larimer.org/naturalresources/red_mountain.cfm

Red Mountain to open for the season Tuesday

Reporter-Herald 2/27/11

FORT COLLINS — Larimer County's Red Mountain Open Space will reopen to the public on Tuesday.

Red Mountain Open Space closes from Dec. 1 through March 1 each year because of winter weather conditions and to help protect winter range habitat for big-game animals such as elk and mule deer.

Red Mountain Open Space is 25 miles north of Fort Collins and stretches to the Wyoming border. It connects on the east with Soapstone Prairie, a natural area the city of Fort Collins and county operate.

North Forty News
and archives of the Fossil Creek Current
The community newspaper for northern Larimer County, Colorado

March 2011

Legacy Land Trust has big goal

By JoAn Bjarko
North Forty News

A well-known face in Larimer County, K-Lynn Cameron, has joined the staff of Legacy Land Trust, a nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting natural, scenic and agricultural lands in northern Colorado.

Cameron retired in 2009 as manager of the county's open lands program, where she provided leadership to protect more than 42,000 acres by working with local and state partners.

At Legacy Land Trust she will be working with three other staff members toward a goal of protecting 150,000 acres of key landscapes in Larimer, Jackson and Weld counties. LLT executive director Ryan Boggs noted that the group has given itself 15 years to reach that target.

Conservation vision.
The Legacy Land Trust staff is focused on preserving agricultural lands and wildlife habitat. Pictured are K-Lynn Cameron (left), Erin Quinn, Nora Gilbertson and Ryan Boggs.
–Photo by JoAn Bjarko

LLT was able to bring Cameron on board through a two-year conservation excellence grant from Great Outdoors Colorado. Instead of working full time as director of conservation, Cameron chose to work part time. With the savings in her salary, stewardship coordinator Erin Quinn adds conservation work to her job description and works full time.

"My job is to increase the number of projects the land trust does and mentor Erin so she can move into my position," Cameron explained.

Quinn started work with LLT in June 2008. With a master's degree in natural resource stewardship, it is her job to monitor the lands with conservation easements designed to protect their natural values. LLT currently monitors 113 properties, and Quinn visits each one at least once a year.

"Landowner interaction is the main draw for me going out," Quinn said.

Cameron said her new job is a way to give back and train the next generation of conservation workers. The grant specifically identifies the Waverly area north of Fort Collins as a priority area, she said.

Boggs, who took the helm in May 2009, added that the grant's focus is to protect prime agricultural land that has the capacity to grow local food and to protect critical wildlife habitats along the foothills.

LLT's fourth team member is Nora Gilbertson, who signed on as development director last August. She is heading up the organization's fund-raising efforts, including membership recruitment and special events. Membership levels start at $35.

In recent years there has been some controversy over conservation easements, with allegations that donors received excessive tax credits. Boggs noted that LLT and the conservation community worked with the Colorado Legislature to strengthen the tax credit program.

"Appraisers have to be trained in conservation easements," he said, adding that LLT is certified by the state to work with landowners.

"Legacy Land Trust has a list of appraisers we believe are qualified," Cameron said. "We're doing our part to make sure they get appraisals that meet state and IRS muster."

Conservation easements are legally binding agreements by which a landowner transfers development rights to a private land trust or government entity. The transaction means the land will remain undeveloped and that certain agricultural or other historic uses will be protected. Because the land remains in private ownership, it stays on the tax rolls and continues to be managed by the landowner.

Colorado has also limited the total value of easements it will allow, and the amount could go down because of the state's fiscal crisis. "It's important for land owners considering an easement to not wait," Boggs said.

LLT's work is supported by 720 members. Information is available at www.legacy landtrust.org or by calling 266-1711. The office is located at 214 S. College Ave., Suite 200, in Fort Collins.

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