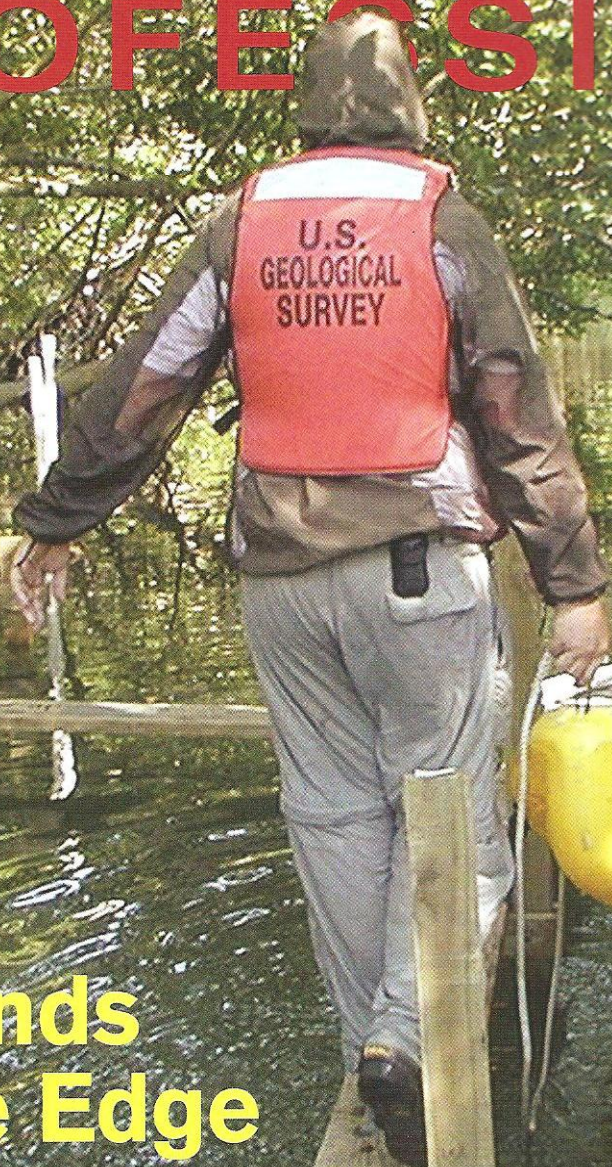


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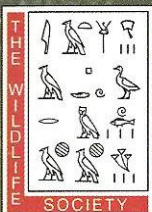


Wetlands on the Edge

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Luring Students to Fish

A NATIONAL SCHOOL PROGRAM BRINGS NATURE TO STUDENTS

By Madeleine Thomas

Katie Cole is well aware that today's barrage of technological advancements, over-stimulating video games, and computer dependency have left children with what's now known as nature-deficit disorder (Louv 2005). That's why as co-founder of the National Fishing in Schools Program (NFSP), Cole is trying to re-establish a connection between children and their natural environment—one fly cast at a time.

"[People have] a perception that fly fishing is hard, it's expensive, and that you have to be in the mountains," Cole says. But NFSP is working to dispel these notions. Modeled after the National Archery in the Schools Program, NFSP began with a pilot program that launched in Nebraska in 2009. Since then, NFSP has trained nearly 200 teachers in 100 schools across the nation. By the end of 2011, Cole estimates that 24,000 students in grades six through 12 will have participated.

To bring NFSP into their schools, teachers must undergo a one-day training session conducted by a certified NFSP trainer and often hosted by state fish and wildlife agencies. Even without any prior experience, says Cole, most teachers are amazed at how quickly they are able to learn the basics of fly fishing. "I had never even fished before," says Valencia Leiviska, a physical education teacher at Lewis and Clark Middle School in Omaha, Nebraska. "It just looks so hard." But by the end of the training day, she had mastered the technique to pass on to her students.

Cole, on the other hand, mastered fly fishing early. It's in her blood. She co-founded NFSP with her father, Dana Cole, founder and director of The School of Flyfishing, a company based in Lincoln, Nebraska, that has taught fly fishing since 1998. He also directs the nonprofit Fishing Education Foundation (FEF), which provides grants to schools participating in NFSP. Some state fish and wildlife agencies also provide matching funds toward the cost of NFSP, which is less than \$3,000 for training and equipment.

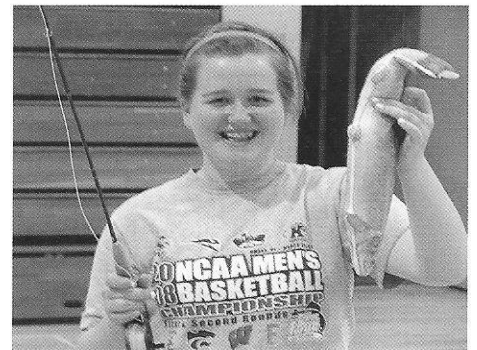
Teachers can choose between two 10-day NFSP curricula; one for fly fishing called "Cast A Fly, Catch A

Student," and one for spincasting called "Cast A Lure, Catch A Student." Both meet National Academic Standards in the areas of physical education, science, technology, and language arts. To avoid weather-related cancellations, kids typically practice casting in school gyms, though NFSP also works with state agencies to plan culminating outdoor field trips for students who complete the program.

The program uses an 11-step system to teach students how to set up and execute a proper cast. Students use the program's curriculum kit, comprised of 10 rod outfits and the "CasTarget system," which consists of a variety of imitation insects and stuffed fish replicas of 20 different fish species—including bluegill, Atlantic salmon, and brown trout. Students can practice their casting accuracy by attempting to "catch" (using Velcro) and then "release" the fish, which are placed on targets. Instructors help students avoid common mistakes, such as using too much wrist or fly line, or taking the rod back too far.

To increase the program's science-education value, each fish is printed with facts including its genus and species name and information about its spawning cycle and habitat. Targets contain information about a variety of universally used flies, such as mayflies and stoneflies, giving students a taste of aquatic entomology.

Leiviska introduced NFSP to her seventh- and eighth-grade girls' physical education classes in 2010. It was such a success that she implemented the program again in February 2011. Leiviska says that teaching children to fish has both physical and emotional rewards. "It's kind of like a lost sport, a lost part of our livelihood," she says. "Everything is indoors or on the couch in front of the TV, instead of something that's been going on for thousands of years, like fishing. It's food for the soul and for the mind." ■



Credit: Courtesy of NFSP

A picture of pride at her fly-fishing success, a student in Valencia Leiviska's class at Omaha, Nebraska's Lewis and Clark Middle School displays her "catch": a stuffed Atlantic salmon.

Madeleine Thomas is the Editorial Intern for The Wildlife Society.