

Assisting Assateague State Park



By Beau Brooks Williams

Snow Hill Middle School partnered with Assateague State Park during the 2006-2007 school year. The project began with visits to Assateague State park to assess the park's needs which could be met by our students. Next, throughout the year, Assateague State Park met with our students to help teach them about the diverse biology of the park, which related to several science standards. And finally, we completed public relation projects for the park in the form of posters and bulletins boards and visited the park to help with a clean-up project.

Best Practice 1: What recognized community need was met by your project (e.g. health, education, environmental or public safety need)?

The need that was met was to assist Assateague State Park with preparing the beaches for another summer season. Each year, hundreds of thousands of visitors go to Assateague to recreate. The impact that is left behind leaves a substantial negative imprint on the wildlife and park. Once students recognized this need, they worked to make educational posters for the park regarding local wildlife and environmental protection reminders regarding the park. They also addressed the need to replenish the sea grass that is crucial to the island's ecology and beach dunes. Additionally, students created educational brochures for the park, trash kits for visitors, and educational games. Students participated indirectly, directly, and advocated environmental safety in the park.

Best Practice 2: How was the project connected to school curriculum (e.g. what course outcomes were met and/or how did the project reinforce or enhance student academic learning)?

The project included many curricular objectives as it met the state's service-learning criteria. The objectives were selected from the core subjects and were used to help guide parts of the service-learning project as it was taught in the classroom.

- In science class, students were exposed to activities that centered on identifying environmental issues, classifying organisms, and identifying natural resources and human needs.
- In social studies, activities centered on analyzing the importance of civic participation, maintaining order for the common good, and analyzing how and why humans modify their environments and its impact.
- In math class, students focused on activities that taught how to use a data display, analyzing the central tendency to determine mean, median and mode, and learned how to relate or apply mathematics within the discipline and to life.
- In integrated language arts (ILA) class, students learned how to gather information from a speaker, compose text using prewriting and drafting strategies, and learned to compose oral, written and visual presentations.

Overall, there was a variety of skills that students learned in the classroom as well as out of the classroom in order to apply them to real life situations while at Assateague State Park.

Best Practice 3: How did you reflect on your experience throughout the project? Throughout the process students had the opportunity to reflect upon their experiences. Students produced journals describing their experiences for their own reflections and for their fellow students to read as well. Students also created brochures in social studies and ILA class to reflect upon their experiences. In addition, students created poems about their experiences in ILA class. And, at the end of the year, they wrote welcome letters to incoming 7th graders that included information about the project.

Best Practice 4: How did students take leadership roles and take responsibility for the success of the project?

Student responsibility was developed throughout the project. It was important early on to allow students to choose a group and project that matched their interest. For instance, students could pick from working with either bayside or ocean side ecology, wildlife, trash collection, or public relations. Each group had certain responsibilities which included creating brochures, education posters, educational games, clean up kits for visitors, or educational PowerPoint for Assateague. Giving students a choice in projects as well as the flexibility to choose how the project was accomplished was central in developing student responsibility. Within each group, student leadership was fostered as well as cooperative learning skills.

Best Practice 5: What community partners did you work with on this project (e.g. non-profits, civic organizations, business that provided donations, etc.)?

2006 was the first year working with Assateague State Park and the service-learning project was a success. Students forged a bond between the state employees and with Americorps volunteers. Students worked closely with both the rangers and Americorps members throughout the year.

Best Practice 6: How did you prepare and plan ahead for the project?

Our team began planning this project at the end of the previous school year after we participated a service-learning project that did not achieve the high quality standards that we wanted for our students. We contacted Assateague and they were receptive to our ideas and our service-learning project. We met several times with Angela Baldwin who is the director of the AmeriCorps volunteer project at the park and is a state ranger. Throughout the year, we shared our ideas and adjusted the project based on the needs of the park as well as the wants of the students.

Our formal plan was submitted to the county and evaluated by the state service-learning fellows that work in our county. We received feedback from the fellows and adjusted the project to meet the standards of the county. As we proceeded through the year, we were always conscientious of the plan. At the end of the year, we reflected on our year's worth of experience and evaluated our experiences. Of course, as with most first year projects, there were experiences that were worthwhile, and those that didn't work or fit in with the project. This year, the 7th grade team hopes to build upon last year's plan.

Best Practice 7: What knowledge and skills did students develop through this project?

We began the year by watching and discussing the video "Learning In Deed" which showcases projects created by middle school students. This was a great way to bring the students ideas to the planning table. Next, we discussed how our goal was to work with Assateague State Park. Further, we briefly explored the ideas and vocabulary associated with service-learning to give students context for completing the project. Our preparation also consisted of a trip to Assateague at which the park rangers gave students a tour of the facilities and discussed with them their needs. Next, AmeriCorps members came to our school and taught information to our students regarding marine biology and ecology. Finally, as students began to work on their interest project, specific content skills were taught to them in order for them to have the capability to complete all projects attempted.