

School students learn about region's drinking water

Tour Middle Pond with district officials



York Water District Patrol Officer Gary Stevens talks with fourth-graders at Middle Pond Thursday, May 13. Stevens used a map of York to specify the role of watershed areas such as Middle Pond, and drinking water. Amy Root-Donle photo

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YORK — The fourth-graders who sprinted up the trail to Middle Pond on a sunny and warm Thursday, May 13, probably didn't realize the trip was in the name of learning and not fun.

Four fourth-grade classes, about 80 students from Coastal Ridge Elementary School, made the 2-¼-mile round-trip trek starting from Middle Pond Road, off Scituate Road. Three other classes went on the same field trip Tuesday, May 11.

For most, it was their first visit to Middle Pond, one of four water sources in York owned by Kittery. York's main source of water is Chases Pond.

For York and Kittery water district supervisors, the field trip was a chance to teach the importance of clean drinking water.

"It's the first time we've done this on this magnitude," said Don Neumann, superintendent of the York Water District.

Reaching out to students, Neumann and others hoped to impress, at an early age, the importance of respecting the watershed — the area around the ponds that supply local faucets.

When the students reached Middle Pond, many got a cup of water from a cooler brought up the trail.

"Some of that water was floating in a pond yesterday," Gary Stevens told the kids.

Stevens is the resource protection manager for the York Water District, and a police officer. It's his job to enforce the rules to help keep the ponds pristine. As an officer, he's able to write court summonses for people who violate the rules.

Hiking, mountain biking and even all-terrain vehicle use are allowed on water district paths, the latter on specified trails by permit only for York, Kittery and Eliot residents.

Swimming, fishing and boating are not allowed.

More than 10 years ago, when Stevens began patrolling the area, he often found people swimming in the ponds, trash in the area, and evidence of campfires. Today it's a much different story, he said.

Still, he said, "I feel our biggest threat to water quality is recreation."

On average, Stevens answers an estimated 10 emergency calls a year on the trails. Calls range from requests for help due to an injury, being lost, or because of a fire, he said.

To help locate victims, the water districts recently began marking numbers on orange posts at the head of trails, in the hope the caller can remember which post area they entered.

At any time, Stevens said, "you can be sure someone's out here hiking, mountain biking."

This at one time included George W. Bush, who, as president, mountain biked on part of the Middle Pond trail. Stevens was among the entourage of Secret Service agents and others who went with the president.

The fourth-grade field trips came a week after National Drinking Water Week, May 3-7. During the week, the York Water District by request opened its treatment plant for tours. Two residents took advantage of the offer, said Neumann.

"We want to continue to educate people about the watershed," he said.

Next year, the districts plan to invite third-graders on the field trips, as those students study water cycles as part of their curriculum.

"A lot of kids never hiked here before to see how beautiful it is," said teacher Beth Switzer. "But now they know it's what they're drinking. It's a good message."

"I learned all of the water from all the ponds come into our house once (it's) cleaned," said fourth-grader Colby, whose last name was withheld because of elementary school policy.

"I think it was cool," said Conall, who had already visited Middle Pond as a Scout.

Together, the Kittery and York water districts own and manage approximately 4,500 acres of watershed land surrounding six ponds and reservoirs in York, according to a released statement from the water district.

The water supplies thousands of customers in Kittery, Eliot and York.

