

Students monitor the Ohio River

Waterway is a classroom

BY TOM O'NEILL | POST STAFF REPORTER

For going on two centuries, the Ohio River has served Northern Kentucky as everything from industrial dumping ground to postcard foreground.

From barge thoroughfare to thoroughly Cincinnati fireworks fare. To the list, add classroom.

The Ohio River Foundation's River Explorer field-trip program recently completed its first full year, bringing more than 1,200 local students and 50 teachers to the banks of the river that connects Pittsburgh to the Mississippi River - and Ohioans to Northern Kentuckians. Students, mostly in middle school, helped collect data from the Ohio and its tributaries for water-quality testing, identified organisms and tracked food chains and ecological trends.

Their equipment: nets and microscopes.

Their subjects: fish, mussels, insects, and pollutant "parts by billion."

Their findings: a treasure trove for aquatic biologist Dr. Chris Lorentz, the director of Thomas More College's Center for Ohio River Research and Education in Crestview Hills. The center has a working relationship with the five-year-old foundation.

The year began in March, with 70 students from Dayton Independent Middle School hitting the riverbank, followed by students from throughout the region. Some live no farther from the river than Covington, but a world away. "The kids are very open-minded, they're like sponges, that's what's good about working with kids," Lorentz said. "They tend to have negative viewpoints of the Ohio River, but they're quickly dispelled."

The program is basically for three seasons, with a winter break. More information on spring programs is available at the foundation's Web site, <http://www.ohioriverfdn.org/>. Field trips for middle-school students will begin in late March or early April. Trips last four to five hours, with a lunch break.

"We had to struggle constantly to get the students to participate in what to them were very unique and strange experiences, including taking a nature walk, throwing plankton nets sitting on the grass, and utilizing microscopes," said Foundation Education Director Annie Morton.

A growing program for high schoolers includes boat trips onto the Ohio and is set to begin in mid-February. Thomas More has set up sites along the Ohio River and its watershed system, from Chilo Lock 34 to Nesbit Park in Loveland, Ohio, to Fernbank Park in Cincinnati's Saylor Park neighborhood. The goal is to bring to life the core curriculum in science and social studies classes.

The lesson for Lorentz is that students gravitate to hands-on experience, and that the river's appearance can be deceiving. "You see a brown river," he said, "you tend to think it's dirty." It is, of course, a relative term.

A century and a half ago, there were far fewer residents and businesses in the burgeoning pig-slaughtering river town called Cincinnati. But they made an unspeakable mess of the river, which as the main way to transfer commerce was common for the era. Businesses dumped their garbage in the river. Sanitation run-off from area homes killed off many species of fish. For a full century, that was pretty much the norm. "About fifty years ago, that was a critical time in Ohio," Lorentz explained. "It was bad, with urban runoff and pollution. Then the Clean Water Act came up in the '70s."

Dozens of species have returned to the river since then, he said.

The microscopes weren't far behind. Copyright 2005, *NKY.com*