

Park rangers promote environmental education

How do you measure a fish's fork length? How are lakes formed? What is zooplankton? How do fish swim?

More than a hundred middle school students from the Central Savannah River area found the answers to these questions (and more) at the Corps of Engineers segment at the 10th Annual Eco-Meet event, May 6.

Corps team members from the J. Strom Thurmond Dam and Lake Project staffed the exhibit, which gave students an opportunity to test their knowledge on lake ecology and fish biology. The Corps team included Ken Boyd, conservation biologist; Susan Boyd, chief ranger; and Eric Haskell, environmental compliance coordinator.

"Essentially, the meet is a middle school science competition where students do hands-on activities and take tests on environmental topics," Susan Boyd said. "The winning teams receive medals and other prizes, plus there is entertainment provided at the end. It's a great way to promote environmental awareness and education in the community."

Founded in 1998, the ESEC serves as an educational gateway for organizations in the Central Savannah River area to coordinate events and collaborate on projects. The cooperative began with only a handful of participating organizations but has expanded throughout the years to include state and federal governments, non-profit groups and academic institutions.

"It's a unique group of organizations that are all involved with the environment," Susan Boyd said, listing a few examples such as the U.S. Forest Service, Fort Fordon, Ga., and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, and of course, the Corps of Engineers.



Middle school students measure a Shortnosed Gar, a species of fish that inhabits Thurmond Lake, at the Corps of Engineers booth at the annual Eco-Meet event. The students measured total length (end to end), fork length (end of snout to fork in tail) and standard length (body of fish minus caudal fin).

Each year, the event is hosted by a different site among members of the CSRA. This year's host was the Silver Bluff Audubon Center and Sanctuary in Jackson, S.C., a refuge to more than 200 species of birds comprising more than 3,000 acres of forests, fields, lakes and streams.

The Corps' Thurmond team has participated in the Eco-Meet since its inception, focusing on topics ranging from wetlands science to hydropower.

Boyd develops the information packets and rotates through them every few years to ensure returning students don't get tested on the same material.

"We try to tie it back to the standards in their science curriculum and make it interesting for them," Boyd said, noting that a lot of science clubs participate in the event.

Students team up and register for the competition as early as January. They receive study packets on various environmental science topics, which they study in their extra time until the Eco-Meet in May. The teams rotate through each topic station and take tests to win prizes.

"The kids enjoy it. We always get positive feedback," Susan Boyd said.

"We have a very large environmental stewardship program at Thurmond Lake," Susan Boyd said. "We're responsible for a large land and water base, so ensuring the health of the environment we manage is critical."

"It's also important to make the general public and our future generations aware of the resources we manage and how we protect our natural resources," she added. "Events like the Eco-Meet help us tell our story and allow us to give the public a basic scientific understanding." 

By Tracy Robillard, Corporate Communications Office



Ken Boyd, Corps conservation biologist, helps a student inspect a Daphnia, or water flea, under a microscope. The Daphnia is a type of zooplankton – the smallest consumers in a lake ecosystem that eat algae and bacteria. *Photos by Tracy Robillard.*