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## Teen promotes conser. ation at Wildlife camp

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Daniel Straka, 16, has always had an interest in the environment and conser. ation.

So when it came time to find something to do this past summer, he knew he wanted to go to a place where he could immerse himself in the environment.

The Mt. Lebanon High School sophomore and his mother, Rene, searched the Internet for adventure camps, which seemed to be few and far between. Rene Straka said her son was almost headed to a camp in the Adirondacks until they found The Wildlife Leadership Academy here in Pennsylvania.

Each year the Wildlife Leadership Academy holds two field schools, one focusing on the Ruffed Grouse in at Powdermill Nature Reserve in Westmoreland County, and the other called . Pennsylvania Bucktails,” which focuses on the white-tailed deer. The field schools are coordinated by the Pennsylvania Institute for Conservation Education. Straka attended the Bucktails camp, which was held at Stone Valley Recreation Area in Huntingdon County – between Altoona and the State College area – for five days July 5-9. It was his first time at the camp, which is geared toward youth ages 14 to 17.

“There are a lot of sports camps and things like that,” Rene Straka said, but few camps for young people interested in conservation and the environment. She added that the instructors at the camp were “tops in their fields.”

Straka was one of a class of 24 students chosen to apply to the Bucktails program. Rene Straka added that Daniel wrote an essay and had letters of recommendation to attend the program.

Straka recently spoke about his experiences at the academy to a group of about 40 at the Dormont-Mt. Lebanon Sportsmen.s Club, located in North Strabane Township.

“I’m encouraged by that,” said George Taylor, president of the Sportsmen’s Club, referring to the fact that Straka expressed interest in conser. ation. He said he liked having Straka come to speak to “encourage young people to have an interest in shooting sports and conservation.”

Straka said he has had an interest in the environment since he was “about 8 years old.” He added that he learned many things at the camp, including the fact that deer shed their antlers. Straka said the program also taught him the anatomy and physiology of the whitetail deer as well as habitat education.

“We learned the difference between a healthy and an unhealthy forest,” Straka said. He said he also learned about the different species of plants that affect deer habitat as well as how hunting plays a role in conservation.

“Hunting is important because it decreases deer population and deforestation,” Straka said. He added that farmers also see the benefit because deer are not eating their crops if the forest is sustained.

Straka said he participated in daily quizzes at the camp as well as team building exercises and a mock trial.

The program also encouraged its participants to go into their communities to talk about conservation and the environment. Straka said one of the missions of the program is to “sustain wildlife for future generations.” He added that the camp taught him about community leadership and how to be “ambassadors for conservation and their communities.”

At the end of the camp, Straka compiled a book documenting his effort at camp and also documenting his community outreach, which he will then submit to the camp for next year. He hopes to earn a scholarship or be an assistant leader at the camp next year.

Information on the Wildlife Academy can be found at [www.PICEweb.org](http://www.PICEweb.org) and clicking on the Youth Programs Link.

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