

Youth leadership camp to add session on brook trout

By Bob Frye
Capital Correspondent

Greensburg, Pa. — Where once white-tailed deer and ruffed grouse were the object of study, now brook trout will be, too.

The Wildlife Leadership Academy — which serves to educate students ages 14-17 about wildlife and its management — will hold a camp focusing on deer again this year, as it has for each of the last several. It's called Pennsylvania Bucktails.

The ruffed grouse camp of the last few years, called Pennsylvania Drummers, has gone away, though, for one summer at least. In its place, the academy, in partnership with Trout Unlimited, is offering a week-long camp focused on brook trout and coldwater resources. It's called Pennsylvania Brookies.

"Coldwater fisheries are the backbone of our environment. They provide the water source for most other ecosystems," said Rebecca Holler, education coordinator for Trout Unlimited's eastern abandoned mine program.

"Learning about them and what brook trout need teaches about the interconnectedness of life."

Getting that message about natural resources to young people from all across the state who can then carry it home is what the camps are all about, said Michelle Kittell, program coordinator for the Leadership Academy.

"Our mission is to create youth ambassadors for conservation. We give them knowledge about a specific species and tools like leadership and communication skills so that they can go back to their own communities and share what they learned," Kittell said.

Students in each camp — you can get applications and see more about them at www.picoweb.org — learn from instructors pulled from the top ranks of the wildlife field and include biologists and veterinarians from agencies like the Pennsylvania Game Commission, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Quality Deer Management Association and Trout Unlimited.

Students spend up to 18 hours a day at their side, doing things like field research and preparing presentations on what they learned.

When it's all over, they're tasked with going back to their home communities and doing three community service or

outreach programs. They can include talks to sportsmen's and school groups, newspaper interviews and television stories, among other things.

To date, academy graduates have conducted 522 conservation education, communication, and service projects, given more than 2,000 hours of work toward these efforts and engaged over 10,000 Pennsylvania citizens across 44 counties in the state.

The whole program is challenging, said Daniel Straka, a 16-year-old from Allegheny County who took part in Bucktails last summer. But it was definitely worthwhile, he added.

"There are not enough words to express what I experienced," Straka said. "I wish the camp would have lasted all summer."

"These people, I can't say enough about the adults who give back to these kids and let them know there's not only a place for them, but a career path," agreed Rene Straka, Daniel's mother.

"There's all these camps for sports and other things, it's great to have something like this for these kids."

Straka has spoken to the members of the Greater Johnstown Sportsmen's Club, the



Students at last year's Bucktails look over a deer skull as a part of their field exercises.

Photo by Bob Frye

Dormont-Mount Lebanon Sportsmen's Club and several student groups. At each stop, he shared his message about the importance of conservation and the great role the Leadership Academy camps play in teaching it.

"I would highly recommend this camp to others," he said.

Kittell said she's proud of the students, who are "the next generation to speak for wildlife conservation."

"We hope the leadership of Academy youth in their home communities will inspire others to care more and therefore act more on behalf of the environment," she said.

State slashes funding for wildlife

