

- Features**
- News
 - Sports
 - Opinion
 - Features**
 - Sections
 - Extras
 - Ads
 - CU
 - Services
 - Service Directory
 - Online Documents
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Young stewardship

Partnership starts new initiative with eye on long-term sustainability

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Christie Bleck - Journal Staff Writer (cbleck@miningjournal.net) , The Mining Journal

MARQUETTE - If you want kids to appreciate and enhance the common milkweed's role in the ecosystem, it's best to teach them now.

That's at least one goal of a local environmental effort. The Superior Watershed Partnership has received a \$200,000 grant through the Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative, which is funded by the Great Lakes Fishery Trust, to expand K-12 environmental education programming regarding lakes Superior, Michigan and Huron.



Superior Watershed Partnership Program Manager Jenn H...

The new SWP program is called the Upper Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative. GLSI regional hubs across Michigan help students and teachers collaborate with local organizations to address environmental issues.

The SWP initiative is the ninth such hub and will involve students in real-world research and restoration projects in areas such as habitat improvement, stream restoration, lake monitoring and climate change research.

Jenn Hill is the SWP program manager for the initiative.

"Things have been cut, and especially in education with all the cuts they've had, and the teachers want to be doing these things," Hill said, "but they need the time and the resources to make it happen, and that's what this grant supports."

Inquiry-based learning - not just being told things but by questioning - is at the core of the effort, Hill said.

"In taking your students outside into their communities and into their local environment, you're going to stimulate their questioning," she said.

It's also about the world kids know, Hill said, not an abstract environment.

"They're also going to be able to touch it, see it, smell it, feel it, hear it and have a lot more fun getting all the senses engaged, and a lot more learning can happen more quickly sometimes when you're learning in that environment," Hill said.

After all, what kid doesn't like getting dirty?

The SWP, according to Hill, wants to strengthen stewardship of the Upper Peninsula, so it can help develop the next generation of stewardship through the initiative.

Carl Lindquist, SWP executive director, said in an email that by hiring a full-time Great Lakes educator, the SWP can help regional schools and engage K-12 students in Great Lakes stewardship.

"This funding allows the SWP to move from theory to practice when it comes to fostering the next generation of Great Lakes stewards," Lindquist said.

The first project, Hill noted, will focus on the monarch butterfly population, which has been plummeting. SWP is partnering with Monarch Joint Venture, which involves the entire flyway for the butterflies in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

Hill said the funding will support kids planting 15,000 U.P. milkweed seeds and raising them in greenhouses at school and at the U.S. Forest Service greenhouse on Wright Street. The kids then will plant them near the tip of the Stonington Peninsula, called Peninsula Point, a globally important migration stop for the monarchs.

The field trips, though, are more than just a chance to get out of the classroom.

"They're connected to a larger project, like this is about the entire life cycle," Hill said. "They're going to have the beginning where they planted the seeds, and they're going to have the transplantation into the ground, and then the opportunity to come back to look for larvae and eggs if the teachers can do that."

That means the project is more than a one-day event. Hill said it's about creating projects and activities that last the school year so kids are getting the chance to learn in their local environment.

What people have found, she said, is when kids have a purpose outdoors, they can be more focused.

"The chance to do something productive - that's meaningful, is tangible to their communities - is the goal of the program," Hill said. "And that's what makes it special and different."

Tangible results, obviously, are more milkweed plants, which monarch larvae use exclusively to feed. However, Hill noted they also are pollinator plants beneficial for bees.

"So, it's a chance to educate kids, again on that larger connection, that we are dependent on these insects, even, to help our food grow," she said.

The initiative also will help fight "nature-deficit order," which, Hill acknowledged, exists even in the Upper Peninsula with kids spending more time in front of video games and screens. Hill pointed out the project will help families, teachers and community groups get the youngsters outside.

That's important, she said, considering the U.P. doesn't have a huge population.

Hill said, "So, the more we can get kids engaged, I think the stronger our communities are going to be."

Of course, the monarch butterflies should be better off, as would any part of the ecosystem that's the focus of the Upper Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative.

"The fundamental is that these kids understand as citizens we make decisions about public funding, about what happens with laws that have passed, about protecting things, and they see the value of that," Hill said, "so what matter what career path they go down, they're going to be good stewards and citizens of our environment, because it's pretty complex, sometimes, the questions we're being asked."

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