**Showcasing the DNR: DNR mentorship program provides life-changing outdoor experiences**

*Gov. Gretchen Whitmer’s state budget support aids program*

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Under a powder-blue sky dotted with cotton-like clouds, the four wader-clad students walked near the lake’s edge, slowly gliding their nets attached to tall wooden poles back and forth beneath the water’s surface and through a smattering of green and yellow lily pads.

On this steamy, late July afternoon, these environmental stewardship interns were searching for what they’d recently learned were “macroinvertebrates.”

What they found – crayfish, dragonfly nymphs, even a catfish, among other tiny lifeforms – revealed the quality of water in this small lake on Belle Isle in Detroit.

“We also saw a frog over there,” said Naomi Parker, 19, pointing just beyond a towering weeping willow along the shoreline, “which means this water is really good.”

Parker, along with nine other high school and college-aged students, are taking part in field trips like this one as participants in the Detroit Zoological Society’s Environmental Stewardship Internship Program.

The community-based initiative is one of 15 similar offerings that make up this year’s Michigan Department of Natural Resources Summer Youth Employment Program. The Detroit Zoological Society is a nonprofit organization that operates the Detroit Zoo and Belle Isle Nature Center.

The youth program is the result of ongoing support in the state budget presented to the Michigan Legislature by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer. The initiative, operating since 2012, provides summer employment, job skills training and potential career opportunities at the Michigan DNR. It also opens up new outdoor recreation experiences for young people in the four communities where it operates: Detroit, Saginaw, Flint and Pontiac.

This is Parker’s second summer in the internship program that provides work experience at the nature center on Belle Isle and at the Detroit Zoo in Royal Oak. The Detroit native and sophomore at Grand Valley State University is considering pursuing a career in biology, so returning to the DNR’s Summer Youth Employment Program made a lot of sense to her.

“It’s very eye-opening,” she said of working outside in nature, sharing what she’s learned with kids who visit the nature center and traveling to different areas of the state to try outdoor activities like kayaking, sailing and navigating a ropes course.

“I feel like a lot of kids from the city don’t get the opportunity to do stuff like this, and I’m just glad I came across this program,” she said. “I’ve done a lot of things I didn’t think I would do, like checking water quality – we’re also going camping in St. Ignace next week – and learning a lot about environmental sciences and careers you can have.

“Last year it was kind of shocking to me because I had never been in nature or engulfed in nature. I learned a lot about birds and frogs, and I realized how important nature is to us. And for us to work together to keep nature intact. It’s a whole big ecosystem and we’re part of that.”

**‘It isn’t just a summer job’**

The DNR’s Summer Youth Employment Program has provided hundreds of students ages 16 to 19 with opportunities to experience work centered on the outdoors and our state’s natural resources. This is done through partnerships with various community-based organizations.

Last summer, some 230 students worked more than 30,300 hours on projects that allowed them to acquire and sharpen valuable life, workplace and employability skills.

The work opportunities ran the gamut, from skilled trades and business operations to landscaping, building tiny homes, harvesting fruit and flowers, growing and delivering produce to hospital patients, piloting drones and much more.

In addition, each year the students experience a variety of outdoor recreation activities at places all around the state as part of their paid positions. Last summer, students visited a total of 16 state parks. These excursions help introduce the students to the myriad ways they could follow a nature-focused career path, such as one with the DNR.

Part of the program also involves three special collaborations: with the Detroit Story Lab, teaching students how to lower and raise sails while boating on the Detroit River; the Bay Sail Program, taking students out on Saginaw Bay; and Huron-Clinton Metro Parks, where students engage in swimming lessons.

“This isn’t just a summer job – it’s a mentorship,” said Nicole Hill, youth engagement and employment coordinator with the DNR’s Parks and Recreation Division. “These experiences help these young people develop personally and professionally.

“We’re also creating a future pipeline of employees. So, as the DNR and community agencies benefit, the program is also creating these opportunities for young people – they get paid, at least minimum wage, but some are getting as much as $16 an hour depending upon the agency and the program. In some cases, they are provided breakfast and lunch, and when they go to a state park, they’re usually camping and stay there for a day or two, and they get to go out and do recreational activities. They are getting some really unique experiences.”

These DNR Summer Youth Employment Program experiences create a springboard for students, who go on to finish high school and college and, in some cases, find jobs with the DNR and in skilled trades. And while the program is focused on offering opportunities to youth living in southeast Michigan, Hill is eager to see the program eventually expand.

“We hope to grow this program across the state,” she said, adding that exposing students to occupations available throughout the DNR, in addition to parks and recreation positions, is an important goal. “We’re not just focusing on them being park rangers. We are exposing them to a variety of careers that they can pursue throughout the department. We want to them to become future DNR employees.”

**Funding the Summer Youth Employment Program**

The program began more than a decade ago with $2 million in state funding to support partnerships with community agencies, Hill said. Over time, this amount has dipped to just under $1 million per year for operations.

“Thankfully this year we were awarded a one-time amount of an additional $500,000, from the state’s general fund,” she said, adding that in both 2023 and 2024 the program has had its highest agency participation with 15 organizations employing youth.

**Life-changing experiences**

“I wasn’t much of a nature person,” said Daijha Ross, 16, as she used her fingers to sift through a container filled with lake water, searching for macroinvertebrates hidden between the grass, stones and sediment also caught in her net.

Being part of the internship program on Belle Isle changed her perspective, she said.

“I genuinely want to help take care of the planet,” said Ross, who lives in Detroit and will be a high school senior this fall. “I think a lot more people should know about this program and try it. I don’t think I would have ever done any of this otherwise.”

Rico Tucker-Barner, 17, said learning about bees and pollination has stood out as an internship highlight on Belle Isle.

“I really wanted to experience nature – I really like animals,” said Tucker-Barner, a first-year intern who will start his senior year in high school this fall in Detroit.

These first-time experiences are common among students in the program, Hill said.

“I think that the biggest benefit is the opportunities made available to young people,” she said. “As someone who has a deep passion for connecting people to their future and whatever their interests are, I know that exposure is really critical, especially for youth in the communities we serve. It opens up new opportunities to them. Even if they don’t end up in the DNR, they are exposed to so many things. It’s so important to their growth.

“There are so many first-time experiences – many of them have never been on a boat before, or kayaked, or camped, or spent time at a state park … we’re talking about some life-changing experiences that are opening their minds to other opportunities. We hear them say things like, ‘I can’t believe I was a part of this’ and ‘I created this pavilion’ or ‘I helped put in this sidewalk.’ And then they can come back with their family and tell them, ‘I did this.’”

Even the partner agencies and their staff are exposed to new things that can shift their perspectives about the power of nature and the outdoors.

“It’s been pretty rewarding for me,” said Rob Brown, executive director of the First Ward Community Center in Saginaw. “Not only because I am working with our young folks and knowing they’re seeing something new each year in Michigan, but also because I am a lifelong resident of Michigan, of Saginaw, and before this program, there were areas of Michigan I had never experienced. Each year I experience something new. I talk with our young folks all the time and I tell them, ‘The one thing I know for sure you’re going to see a part of Michigan you’ve never saw before.’”

The DNR’s eight-week-long Summer Youth Employment Program introduces the teens working with the First Ward Community Center to skills like how to safely use hand and power tools, “to mimic what a park ranger might do on a daily basis,” said Brown, who has been with the program since its inception.

“Our students learn how to paint, use those tools, operate lawn equipment on vacant land or sometimes through a partnership with another agency or organization that provides a work experience in line with the DNR,” he said. “We’re excited – this season we have 24 students, a really great group of students.”

The students work hard and play hard, too, as they immerse themselves in nature.

“Some of our young folks, they start to understand the peace you get when you’re in nature,” he said. “Cell phones – they start to put them away and actually enjoy the outdoors. That’s really exciting for me and to us as an organization. Seeing them on the water, hiking a trail, enjoying nature, it’s a good amount of joy for them. It’s therapeutic.

“I would love for folks to know that this program is life-expanding – it provides opportunities that our kids are rarely exposed to. The program allows them to build their network, see new places, expand their mind … You almost can’t put it into words. You have to experience it. It’s one of those experiences that sticks with you for a lifetime.”

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