GROTON OPEN SPACE ASSOCIATION
A Club for Outdoor Explorers

An all-volunteer land trust in Connecticut helped start an after-school club that sparks kids’ love for nature and college students’ interest in environmental careers.

What do you do when elementary school students are afraid to go outdoors? Teacher Ben Moon loves to be in the woods—but recalling when he took his third-graders on a field trip to a nature center a few years ago, he says, “I had a lot of kids who were actually really nervous to go outside. The more I talked to them about it, the more I realized that not only are they not getting opportunities to get out, they’re being conditioned that the outdoors can be a really dangerous place and it’s something to avoid. That kind of broke my heart.”

Ben lives and teaches in the town of Groton, on the coast of Connecticut, and he likes to discover new open space and trails near home. That’s how he found himself on a hike led by a local land trust, the Groton Open Space Association, where he started talking with Syma Ebbin, a board member, about his students’ discomfort in nature.

They came up with an idea. The land trust has protected some amazing places in Groton, but their preserves aren’t well known. Syma says, “We thought, ‘What if this could be a resource? We have all of this wonderful open space. What if these could be places where students can get out of their classrooms, places to go on field trips that are local and close by?’”

They started a club at Ben’s school, the Catherine Kolnaski (CK) Magnet School, to explore these local wild places. The school provides teachers and busing. Syma, a professor of environmental science and policy at the University of Connecticut, co-leads the hikes and coordinates the college student volunteers. The all-volunteer land trust has provided funding for cinch packs for the kids.

When they launched the CK Explorers Club, for fourth- and fifth-graders in 2014, Ben wasn’t sure how many kids would want to join. As it
turned out, they had to hold a lottery to decide who would get in. In its first three years, the club grew from one group of 15 students, with one teacher and one intern, to three groups of 15 students each, led by four teachers and seven interns. The club brings together “super diverse” groups of kids, Ben says—different ethnicities, special ed and regular ed, from poor families and rich families, families that hike and families that don’t. 

“I DON’T KNOW ANYTHING; I CAN’T DO IT”

When Amanda Dostie II agreed to intern with the Explorers club during her junior year at the University of Connecticut, it didn’t exactly match her vision of herself as a research scientist. She was a marine science major. Amanda had never tried teaching but she loved hiking—so why not? “I didn’t think I’d be good with the kids,” she says. “It was just for fun.”

When they set out on their first hike, the students lacked confidence in the woods, she recalls. “A lot of the kids would say stuff like ‘I’m stupid, I don’t know anything; I don’t go hiking; I can’t do it.’”

But as they got outdoors more, they started to grow in confidence. Each session of the club runs for six weeks, with one after-school outing per week. They go to many places that Groton Open Space Association helped to protect. The students see forests, meadows, salt marsh, streams—and a waterfall, which is usually a hit. The final outing is a kayaking trip, guided by New England Science and Sailing. For most kids it’s their first time in these natural areas and their first time kayaking.

Ben says the kids like the sense of adventure. After a structured school day, they get to run around, climb on rocks, jump off logs or pick up bugs and salamanders. He says. “The first trip tends to be a little quieter. I think

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—Syma Ebbin, Groton Open Space Association board member and University of Connecticut professor

“By the last couple hikes you can definitely tell they’re a lot more comfortable being on a trail, being outside, being in the woods.”

—Ben Moon, Catherine Kolnaski Elementary School
the kids are kind of feeling it out. But by the last couple hikes you can definitely tell they’re a lot more comfortable being on a trail, being outside, being in the woods.”

The students also grew more open to the experience, Amanda says. “A lot of them would start off (saying things) like ‘I don’t really like hiking—it’s icky; I don’t like the outdoors; this is boring; I don’t want to do this.’ And, as it went on, they just loved it more and more. Every little thing, they would be like ‘What’s that? What’s that?’ You could just see the spark grow from there.”

Ben notes that the kids start to ask better questions. “If we see a stream, kids will ask questions like ‘So where does that water go?’ To me, that’s a really cool question. That’s the beginning of scientific inquiry. That’s starting to expand beyond what you see.”

**MAKING THE FUTURE A BETTER PLACE**

Afterward, the students write about what the club means to them. One girl wrote, “Hiking was a way to get out of the house and get some exercise. Before, I would sit at home and watch TV. I also LOVED kayaking. It was so much fun. I will definitely be going kayaking with my family this summer!”

A girl named Mali wrote, “I think this club is very important not just because you learn plants and different kinds of animals, you also learn teamwork.”

A boy named Vincent wrote, “Before you start is a big difference than the end of it. You will learn some exciting facts and find some exciting things. The CK Explorers Club means a lot to me.”

While the club gets kids exploring nature, it also gets college students exploring career options. As she was kayaking with the CK Explorers, Amanda met her future boss at New England Science and Sailing. The summer before her final semester, she got a job there as a marine science instructor—a job she loves, teaching kids of all ages, out on boats, kayaks and paddleboards. Now, teaching rather than research is her career focus.

She says, “I wanted to do research because I wanted to make the future a better place. Then I realized that if you want the future to be a better place that starts with your youth. I started seeing how much of an influence teaching had on them and it made me want to keep coming back and keep doing it.”

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**FIND MORE**

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For more information on these community attribute icons and how you can increase your conservation impact, see: www.lta.org/measures

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Students love to climb on the many erratic boulders we come upon during the hikes.