

A Cast of Thousands

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Okay, so Carteret or Elizabeth may not come to mind when you think about places to go fishing. However, those two towns – among several others – are where New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection is taking kids fishing during the spring and summer. The Urban Watershed Education and Fishing Program (Urban Fishing Program) brings children to their local waterways to fish. Not only have most of these children never before fished, but many have never been to their local waterfront.

The goal of the Urban Fishing Program is to build awareness of the complexity and interrelated nature of an urban estuary. The Urban Fishing Program is an extension of a wider, community-based public information effort to inform citizens about the dangers of consuming recreationally caught fish and crabs from the Newark Bay Complex. (For information about New Jersey's fish consumption advisories, see page 22 or go to www.FishSmartEatSmartNJ.org.) The four-day program, offered in urban areas around the state, culminates with a fun day of fishing.

The fishing day begins with learning what it means to be an ethical angler, as well as promoting the concept of catch-and-release fishing. Young people learn about equipment, proper baiting techniques and the type of fish they are likely to catch. Not long after we start fishing, most of the youngsters are baiting their own hooks and asking about other places to fish. The day concludes with a fascinating fish dissection and anatomy lesson.

"One thing I will always cherish," says Joyce Pinkava, a long-time volunteer with the Division of Fish and Wildlife, "is the wide-eyed looks of excitement when the children, who have never before held a fishing rod, catch their first fish. It may be a bluefish off the bulkhead in Bayonne, a huge bass in Linden or a teeny bluegill in Branch Brook Park."

Research proves that teaching youth about fishing can be a great way to teach about the environment. Participation in fishing leads to more positive attitude toward the outdoors. Environmental education programs that provide a hands-on experience help create a greater awareness of one's place

in the environment. Studies also show that a child's knowledge of – and attitude toward – nature is typically gained through direct contact, not by reading a book in a classroom.

The Urban Fishing Program is important to New Jersey. A child's exposure to fishing is crucial to their participation as adults and anglers can be thoughtful environmental stewards. A recent national study shows that of the youth who had experienced fishing, a majority reported that it was a person or a group which had a positive influence on their participation. Yet only a fraction of those youths responded that they had ever heard a teacher or guest speaker at school talk about fishing. Those youngsters who had been positively influenced were significantly more likely to fish more often and to have a greater interest in fishing.

Fishing, which knows no cultural or ethnic boundaries, brings participants one step closer to personally accepting responsibility for conserving our natural world. It is essential that young people are aware of – and feel they are an integral part of – the natural world. Clearly, the best way to achieve this is by creating opportunities which bring them in contact with nature. The Urban Fishing Program provides children with a greater sense of connection to the environment, helping to establish an aware, responsible citizenry who recognize we are all stewards of the land. Each of us leaves our footprints.

The Urban Fishing Program provides the foundation on which to develop a positive interaction and a sense of stewardship with natural resources in the state. In order to sustain this learning outcome, we encourage schools and communities to integrate into their programs water resource management and fishing clubs.

Now entering its 11th year, the Urban Fishing Program is funded by the Division of Watershed Management, the City of Bayonne and the Bayonne Municipal Utilities Authority. The program originally focused only in the northeastern part of the state, but has expanded to include such places as Newark, Camden, Trenton, Bayonne, Jersey City, Elizabeth, Linden and Carteret.

