



# Natural Amb



Two boys huddle around a microscope and scribble their discoveries on an activity sheet.

Across the room, a pair of girls ooh and aah over an animal skeleton. At the computers, a group of kids works through an interactive program about animals. When the hour

is up, the Animal Adaptations Laboratory in the Zoological Society of Milwaukee's Conservation Education Department hums with activity. Kids make a run for their coats and eagerly line up at the door in anticipation of touring the Milwaukee County Zoo.

These children, fourth-grade students at Hawthorne Elementary School in Milwaukee, were at the Zoo in February as part of the Zoological Society's Animal Ambassador program. The program, now in its 17th year, gives second- through fourth-grade students from metro-Milwaukee schools, many of

them in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, the opportunity to learn about animals, their habitats and efforts to save them. In the 2004-'05 academic year, the program reached more than 1,600 students at 21 participating schools. Each school has a corporate, foundation or civic-group sponsor.

"The Animal Ambassador program has introduced thousands of children to conservation and animals throughout the years," says Dr. Dawn St. George, former director of education at the Zoological Society. "Students get more than a 'program about animals.' They get an experience because they actually see the animals they are studying. Our hope is that through this experience, students will become champions of wildlife and the environment."

Second- and third-grade students – Pee-Wee and Junior Ambassadors, respectively – receive a classroom visit from a Zoological Society educator who introduces a topic such as ecosystems. Students also get a tour of the Zoo. Fourth-grade students, called Senior Ambassadors, follow a semester-long program in which they learn about wildlife and conservation, complete special activity sheets and visit the Zoo twice during the school year. "I like how this program is connected to school curriculum," says Linda Roundtree, principal of Hawthorne Elementary, a school that joined the Animal Ambassador program in 2006, thanks to its sponsor, Sensient Technologies Foundation, Inc. "Students really get hands-on lessons about animals and science from experts in the field."

The Animal Ambassador program encourages interest in conservation and wildlife through science, reading and writing. For example, in the Animal Adaptations Lab students



Bresha Gibbs is awarded books by Vinitia Strong-McDonald of Chase, which sponsors Albert Story School, at last June's Animal Ambassador graduation ceremony.

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study animals' eating, defense, and movement adaptations by viewing animal artifacts and using microscopes and computers. Julie Emerson, Zoological Society school program manager, and other Zoological Society educators then guide students through activity sheets about what they learned. Says Roundtree: "I like all the writing that's involved in this program. It makes a powerful impact when children take their assessments." When touring the Zoo, students are so curious about the animals that they read exhibit signs, says Hawthorne science teacher Annette Perry. "This program really enhances reading skills!"

Back at school, students learn about endangered animals and the Zoo's role in wildlife conservation. They discuss how they can care for their local environment by recycling and cleaning up discarded trash that could harm animals or encourage pest species. Dominique Robinson, a fourth grader at Hawthorne, says she never thought about animals and the environment before taking part in Animal Ambassadors. "You discover stuff that you've never discovered before," she says. Students also can ask questions about animal and science-related careers. "I don't know if I would want to make science my career, but I really like learning it," says Russell Schiller, Dominique's classmate.

After completing the program in June, students have a graduation ceremony, complete with certificates. Last year, students at Albert Story Elementary School (see photos) got to meet live animals such as a parrot and an owl when they graduated from the program. Students also receive books about animals as a reward for completing special activity sheets with family members. "I really like the festivities of this program!" says Roundtree. "We don't always celebrate success, but in this program, we do! The graduation ceremony really motivates the kids." Students also receive complimentary Zoo admission tickets and parking passes at graduation so they can return to the Zoo in the summer with their family members as "Animal Ambassadors." Sparking lifelong interest in animals may be the program's biggest success. Adds Roundtree: "When kids come back from the Zoo, you can hear the excitement in their voices. They'll say, 'I got to see this or touch that!' It's just awesome."



-by Julia Kolker

Left page top: Malachi J. Young, a fourth grader at Albert Story School, admires a medal he received at Animal Ambassador graduation last June.

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Ciara Carmichael and Shontierra Wren, fourth-grade students at Hawthorne Elementary School, answer questions about an animal skeleton in the Animal Adaptations Lab.

Shumar Foulks and his fourth-grade classmates from Hawthorne Elementary School focus on an interactive program about animals in the Animal Adaptations Lab.

