

My Water Comes from the San Juan's

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New curriculum connects place, concepts for regional students

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Article Last Updated: Tuesday, May 17, 2011 6:21pm

Keywords: [Education](#),

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For students in the San Juan Basin, the water cycle no longer starts with a passing cloud dropping rain on a distant mountaintop.

Thanks to a new curriculum resource, students can learn how water flows through the San Juan Mountains – from Engineer Mountain to the Animas River – and about the wildlife it encounters and the local reservoirs where it is stored.

The program, designed for third- through fifth-graders, is called “My Water Comes From the San Juan Mountains” and includes a storybook, lesson plans and activity kit. The project was a collaboration between the Mountain Studies Institute, San Juan Public Lands, the University of Colorado at Boulder and Fort Lewis College.

The books and activity kits were introduced into classrooms last August, said Randy Boyer, executive director of the San Juan Board of Cooperative Educational Services, which helped get the curriculum into schools.

In all, teachers in 15 elementary schools from Pagosa Springs to Dove Creek were given the book, lesson plans and a tub of the supplies needed to produce about 30 hands-on experiments for students.

The experiments allow students to explore topics such as life in local creeks, how water runs through the San Juan Mountains and the dynamics of the Animas River, said Marcie Demmy Bidwell, executive director of Mountain Studies Institute.

The book was adapted from one developed by the University of Colorado at Boulder with a National Science Foundation grant aimed at combining scientific research and science education. The pages include drawings by Needham Elementary School third-graders.

The San Juan Mountains version is helpful for students because it ties the scientific concepts to the phenomena and mountains they see every day, Bidwell said.

“There’s a lot to be gained from connecting general education materials to our sense of place and our understanding of our environment,” she said. “The original book put more of a focus on the Rocky Mountains, but a lot of folks in our region don’t necessarily identify with that term.”

Teachers who have used them said the book and activities add a new dynamic to their lessons about water.

“It draws the topic of the lesson into something the kids have firsthand knowledge of and helps them make personal connections to what they’re learning,” said Kathie Shock, a third-grade teacher at Florida Mesa Elementary School.

Linda Wilkinson, a teacher at Park Elementary School, said the hands-on activities enhanced the curriculum she already was teaching about the water cycle.

“We’ve never been able to go into quite the detail as we could this year,” she said. “The activities made it much more clear to (the students).”

One of the most effective resources in the kit was a relief map of the San Juan Mountains that students could pour water on to simulate rainfall and the way water runs through the mountains, Wilkinson said.

“They could really see how it works,” she said.

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