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Potato Hill Farm connects kids to nature

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LISA KAPPS/Pennysaver

This goat is one of the animals at Potato Hill Farm. School groups that visit the farm are given a farm tour and students see a variety of animals, including goats, black sheep, alpacas, horses, donkeys and highland cattle.

By LISA KAPPS

Pennysaver

Posted Jun 04, 2009 @ 06:00 AM

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BOONVILLE — In between bites of their lunch, Steven Sayles and James Rossiter talked about their morning at the Potato Hill Farm Outdoor Education Center in Boonville.

“We went on a horse carriage,” said Sayles, 8, a second grader from Oneida Castle.

“We hiked,” said his classmate Rossiter, who’s also 8.

“We looked at animals like frogs,” Sayles said.

“And plants!” Rossiter said.

Their field trip to the Potato Hill Farm was fun – not educational at all – the boys said. In fact, they couldn’t think of a single thing they learned.

But JoAnn Ballard, center director, pointed to a child feeling the texture of pine needles on the trees. The children’s botany lesson earlier that morning included information about pine trees.

“Our mission is really to reconnect children to nature in a peaceful, picturesque, educational environment,” Ballard said.

Potato Hill Farm is a nonprofit organization. In the past year, about 10,000 children have taken field trips to the farm – where they take a farm tour, a horse and carriage ride, look for tadpoles, turtles and salamanders in the pond and learn about birds native to the area.

As children – even those who live in rural areas – become increasingly disconnected from the outdoors, field trips to Potato Hill Farm are “giving kids a safe place to go and explore,” Ballard said.

“They just have lost touch with nature,” said guide Steve Hunter.

“They can’t get over the space,” Judy Wilson, a guide at the farm who specializes in botany said of how children react to the farm, which sits on some 60 acres.

Wilson said children also are often unable to identify some of the animals; for example, children often identify the highland cattle, one of several farm species, as bulls, buffalo or yaks.

“But they know it’s an animal,” she laughed.

“A lot of it, too, is to get them interested in nature as a lifelong interest,” said Wilson. “Their environment needs them.”

The program began three years ago, when Ballard began offering farm tours to school groups. Just over one year ago, the program expanded, with the goal that 3,000 children would attend programming at the farm.

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In addition to farm tours and environmental education, the program is also designed to allow schools to use the students' time at the Potato Hill Farm toward their mandatory physical activity time.

Hill Farm toward their mandatory physical activity time.

In the summer, students take part in hiking and mountain biking; winter activities include snow shoeing and cross-country skiing.

"Our hope is to allow children to get outside and engage in aerobic activities," Ballard said.

Whatever the season, children are supplied gear and safety equipment.

"The unique aspect of this is that it is all free," Ballard said. "It allows kids not to be separated by any degree of financial ability. All kids have the same equipment."

Steve Sanderson, a physical education at Clinton Middle School, brought seventh graders to Potato Hill Farm this winter.

Sanderson chose Potato Hill Farm because of its focus on physical activities, he said. During their field trip, students were able to cross-country ski and snowshoe.

"Basically we wanted to go there because they offer lifetime activities, and it's something that a lot of our students hadn't been exposed to, which was the cross-country skiing," he said.

The staff has designed the curriculum so that children can mountain bike from point to point where they will get a lesson about, for example, the pond ecosystem and animals that live there.

Ballard said this teaches children about the possibility of using a bike as a means of transportation.

"It's educational and it's physical," said Hunter, who works as a bike coach, and who coordinated the pond curriculum.

Currently, the Potato Hill Farm staff is currently working on a new program that will include geology.

Ballard said she is considering partnering with other groups such as Cornell Cooperative Extension and the Girl Scouts.

Because Potato Hill Farm is not open to the public – the facility is reserved for school classes and recreational groups – Ballard recommends that parents who want to share the outdoors with their children take them to the BREIA trails in Boonville. The trail system is open all year long for mountain biking, hiking, skiing and snowshoeing.

"And let your kids teach you about what they learned here," she said. "You start looking for that connection for yourself."

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