



Youth Odyssey brings kids to nature at Nueces Delta Preserve

An outdoor hike masquerades as a counseling session, a nature lesson and a self-confidence booster through the Youth Odyssey program.

Combining life skills and outdoor experiences, Youth Odyssey provides a special perspective to kids struggling with school and life.

“Through exploring nature, we see changes in their behavior and overall confidence in themselves,” said Becky Koeller, Youth Odyssey’s program director. “They realize that they have many talents that will help them be a successful community member. Nature is a prime medium for youth to see their worth.”

Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program invites Youth Odyssey leaders and kids to the Nueces Delta Preserve, the 5,400-acre property near Odem owned by the estuary program. About 150 kids visited for overnight camping trips last year. The partnership is expanding to four, five-day trips this summer.

Youth Odyssey participants are selected by schools and recreation centers throughout the area. The children, ages 10-17, attend team-building sessions that focus on basic life skills - communication, goals setting, problem solving, leadership, and trust - before going kayaking, hiking, rock climbing, and to ropes courses.



Nature hikes reveal there is more in the outdoors than the Youth Odyssey campers.



Kayaking helps Youth Odyssey campers practice their communication skills and gives them a chance to move under their own power.

Children who follow the Youth Odyssey rules, show improvement in group and individual respect are allowed to go on the wilderness trip, Koeller said. Each trip has a group of about 10 to 12 children.

“Our programs provide youth with the needed skills to successfully navigate through their lives,” Koeller said. “The Delta property has been a great venue for our youth to show tremendous growth and maturity.”

Youth Odyssey and the estuary program teamed up with the help of a \$36,000 grant from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

While the Nueces Delta Preserve is the site of school field trips, with 2,200 area students visiting in 2009, this Youth Odyssey partnership allowed the estuary program to expand its mission of reaching children who might not otherwise get the chance to go outdoors.

“We’re getting kids out into the estuary,” said Jake Herring, a project manager with CBBEP. “They weren’t out there taking a science class but they

were outside, getting away from the video games, developing leadership skills to be successful in life.”

Bob Corrigan, a CBBEP board member, said programs like Youth Odyssey are critical for getting the next generation into the outdoors so they in turn will work to protect and preserve that natural world.

“If we don’t introduce those people to nature to stimulate that feeling in the gut that we’ve got to take care of it, well, it’s a train wreck,” he said.

Corrigan learned of Youth Odyssey through his Texas Parks and Wildlife connections, and has seen firsthand how the kids turn their lives around.

“When you take these kids out and they see there is something other than drugs and all that other stuff, they actually walk away with a feeling that there may be hope,” he said. “We teach three things; team work, self respect and confidence in themselves.

One of the benefits of such outdoor activities, Koeller said, is it removes the distractions - television, video games, school bullies, and complicated home lives. The guided sessions allow teens to focus on bettering themselves.

For children who haven’t spent much time outdoors, Youth Odyssey gives them the space they need.

“When you are on the trips it lets you get away from the city and lets you think about whatever problems you might have,” said one youth participant in an evaluation form.

Youth Odyssey camping trips are true camping trips, with the youth pitching tents, cooking, and



Campers use all their senses during these outings, comparing jawbones, footprints and smelling huisache blooms.

cleaning the site themselves. There is hiking, rock climbing, and kayaking, activities that call upon the communication and teamwork skills learned in previous sessions.

“There’s so much out there that teens have never seen; birds, flora, fauna, and animal tracks,” Koeller said. “They get a chance to check out an estuary and see how full of life it really is.”

Koeller relies on her a background in environmental science and education during Youth Odyssey outings.

“When we go out into nature, we talk about what’s going on at home, school, etc,” she said. “When we see something on the trail, we talk about it in a way that gets them excited about nature and we relate all activities back to their home, school, and social lives, showing the youth that they can rise above their present circumstances and reach their goals.”

Read more about Youth Odyssey at www.youthodyssey.com. Learn more about the Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program at www.cbbep.org.



The Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program is a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting and restoring bays and estuaries in the 12-county region of the Texas Coastal Bend. CBBEP is partially funded by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

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