

Connections Made In A Forest



Last Friday morning I was resting on my perch about half way up an old Douglas fir tree. I had just spent a long night hunting wood rats and was trying to catch up on a little sleep. All of a sudden, I was startled by the chatter of human voices right under my tree! Of course, having exceptionally good hearing, I couldn't help but listen in. I was very surprised and quite pleased by what I heard.

"What do you think is the secret of life out here in the forest?" Poppy, one of the RVOEP instructors, asked the group as they sat down in a circle to rest. There was a long pause, and then one of the students shyly raised her hand. "Well, we've been studying food chains, so that must have something to do with it."

"I know the secret! I know the secret!" a small, freckle-faced boy excitedly interrupted. **"It's rocks!"**

"How do you figure that rocks are the secret of life?" inquired Poppy with a puzzled look.

"It's easy to explain," he said and enthusiastically continued, "Last year, when we were here in second grade, we learned that rocks are the parents of soil. Well, the rocks help make the soil, the trees and plants grow in the soil and get their energy from the sun, the plant eaters eat the plants, and the animal eaters eat the plant eaters. It all starts with rocks!"

"Wow!" exclaimed Poppy, "Great job tying it all together! You all go through an awful lot of paper at school and paper comes from trees. What happens if the forest gets cut down?"

"The animals wouldn't have a home!" said one student. "And there wouldn't be anything for the plant eaters to eat. If there are no plant eaters then the animal eaters are in trouble."

"They won't have anything to breath either," chimed in another worried voice.

"What can you do so that we don't have to cut down so many trees?" Poppy continued. "How could we use less paper?"

"We could just stop using paper and write on madrone bark or leaves!" someone suggested enthusiastically.

"We could fold our paper and make little sections and write in each section. If we write small, the paper might last the whole day," was another ingenious idea.

At this point, the boy with the freckles interjected with exasperation, "Well, it's obvious that we need to recycle, then our paper gets used again and again and we don't have to cut down very many trees at all."

Ideas were flying when all of a sudden one of the students looked up. "What's that?" he shouted as he pointed in my direction. Necks craned up and twenty little eyes all looked toward me.

"It's an owl!" Poppy cried. "It's been watching us all this time!"

"Owls live here?" exclaimed a surprised student. "I've never seen an owl before!"

"This is a very special owl," explained Poppy in a whisper. "It's a spotted owl and it's probably here because of all the wood rats in this forest."

Well, I was the recipient of a great deal of admiration for the rest of the morning. As the students finally hiked quietly out of the forest for lunch, I was awake just enough to hear one say, "Boy, I really am going to recycle! I had no idea owls really lived here!"

Note: The photo of this spotted owl was taken at the RVOEP on November 3, 2006. A group of students participating in the Munch Line Monitor program (a program with a focus on food chains) were able to observe it off and on throughout the morning. Thank you owl! Teaching an ethic of stewardship and wise use of our resources is an important component of all RVOEP programs. The RVOEP provides students with a place where they can experience the interrelationships that create healthy ecosystems and begin to see how humans depend upon and influence these systems.

Article by Helen Menasian, RVOEP Education Coordinator