

Students learn about water, habitat on Indian River lakes

1000 Islands – The Indian River Lakes Conservancy's fourth season of hosting Project WHIRL (Water and Habitat on the Indian River Lakes) recently concluded after six weeks of summer meetups.

Teens from five local school districts met twice a week to study watershed management, aquatic resources, invasive species, and to investigate the challenges involved in the care of unique freshwater lakes and habitats. The lakes studied this year were Mud Lake, Lake of the Woods, Millsite Lake and Grass Lake, all situated between Redwood and Theresa.

For many of the students, this was their first time on the lakes and their first class in environmental education.

"We don't know a lot of what's out there," participant Meadow Webb said. "WHIRL helped us to step outside of our comfort zones. I touched fish, and... I don't touch fish."

Among the activities students participated in were kayaking, invasive species identification and prevention, watershed mapping, freshwater fish capture methods, salt saturation study methods, and more.

"The program gets kids out on the lakes and thinking about conservation, but it also bridges a gap for the high schoolers between their studies and real-world job opportunities in the environmental fields. We are creating networking opportunities between the students and local organizations and colleges," Heidi Sourwine, IRLC communications and engagement coordinator, said.

Mentoring WHIRL participants this year were: Dr. Michael Twiss, Clarkson biology professor; Mike Lovegreen, retired Soil and Water Conservation district director; Megan Pistoiese and Robert Smith, St. Lawrence Partnership for Invasive Species Management; Sara Trick, Jefferson County Soil and Water Conservation; and Ryan Elliott, state Department of Environmental Conservation. Mr. Elliott authored the Lake of the Woods Management Plan as a graduate student in 2019. Uncle Sam Boat Tours, Ethan Thomson, provided van transportation for the students to the local lakes.

WHIRL participants learn through hands-on experience, using the latest research methods and getting their hands wet and dirty in native wetlands and soils. When asked what he would tell another student interested in the WHIRL programs of the future, Henry Brennan said, "I'd tell them, do it. Also...bring bug spray."

The WHIRL 2022 program concluded with an outreach event at the Millsite Lake Boat Launch, where students shared what they learned over the course of the program with the local community.

The program runs every July and August for students ages 14-18. For information or to sign up for 2023, contact IRLC at info@indianriverlakes.org.



Project WHIRL teen Henry Brennan gets some hands-on experience



Pictured are Project WHIRL teens Kendeal Fernandez, left, and Ella Williamson.



Project WHIRL teens for the summer included, from left, Meadow Webb, Henry Brennan, Kendeal Fernandez, Ella Williamson, Cece Stewart, Azlie Stewart and T Kai Tsuji.



Project WHIRL participants paddle on Grass Lake. The Indian River Lake Conservancy's Grand Lake Reserve is at right.