

# Beyond the Books:

## Taking Education outside the Classroom

By Crystal Kane, Wildlife and Fisheries Science, University of Tennessee

Place students in a classroom for an hour and they will be fortunate to recall three key points from the lecture. Take students out of the classroom, allow them to use all their senses, and you have provided them a chance to develop vital life skills.

This idea is where the University of Tennessee's Wildlife and Fisheries Science program excels. Planned into the junior year curriculum is a semester known as Spring Camp, an outdoor oriented schedule that mixes indoor lectures with a healthy dose of outdoor classes. The benefit of this structure is that students also meet wildlife biologists and managers and begin developing skills necessary to succeed as wildlife professionals. They see first-hand the successes and challenges of land and people management.

In February 2009, Alabama hosted 27 University of Tennessee Wildlife and Fisheries students and their instructor as they visited several wildlife management sites. With the help of refuge manager Dwight Cooley, Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge served as an introduction to waterfowl and moist-soil management and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Refuge System. This provided the students a tangible reference of a wetland complex when they later began their wetland management studies.

The group also visited the Wehle Tract near Union Springs, Ala., managed by the State Lands Division of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. They learned about managing for endangered gopher tortoises by utilizing prescribed fire and timber harvests. At the adjacent Barbour Wildlife Management Area, wildlife biologists Adam Pritchett and Bill Gray presented concepts for game management and the importance of longleaf pine restoration and management for bobwhite and grassland birds. As part of the prescribed fire management class, students assisted managers with a 75-acre prescribed burn as part of the Barbour WMA wild

turkey and deer management program.

Next was a visit to nearby Sehoj Plantation. Students were shown how the area is managed for pine savannahs, both loblolly and longleaf pine for game, and the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. The last two days of the trip were spent on property owned or managed by the Westervelt Corporation. There the class learned about managing hunting leases, game and nongame through the use of timber management and food plots.



Nick Sharp of the Alabama State Lands Division shows the Tennessee students a gopher tortoise.

These concepts were all important for future wildlife managers to understand; however, possibly most important were the discoveries students made that managed to supersede what was intentionally taught throughout the course of the trip.

The students learned about the differences between longleaf pine, loblolly pine and shortleaf pine and their comparative benefits ecologically and economically. They saw how to manage simultaneously for gopher tortoises, deer, quail, turkey, and red-cockaded woodpecker. They were presented with different options for ways to manage hunting leases. All of these pieces of information were important to their future careers as wildlife professionals. The recurring theme, however, was that there are always options in land management.

In the classroom, prescribed fire was often the best answer for habitat management, and therefore was often thought of as the only answer for habitat management. The time spent in Alabama showed the group of UT students that burning is not the only answer, nor is it always the best answer. Sometimes it is not even an option. The students discovered from managers the availability of other management options and how to determine which one to use to achieve objectives.

Students were also made aware of the important concept of diversity in the wildlife profession during their dinner with ADCNR Chief of Wildlife Gary Moody. When asked to look around the room, the students saw nothing more than the familiar faces of their classmates. They were then informed that having five females in the class was an improvement in the typically male-dominated wildlife profession, but not the level that it should be. Beyond that, there was no ethnic diversity. This was a foreign idea to the students. Because their university admits anyone qualified, as does their wildlife program, the students had not thought about that issue. It will be a challenge our generation of wildlife professionals must overcome.

The most important lesson of the trip to Alabama came from the simple experience of the students spending all of their time together for the 15-weeks. Taking students out of the classroom rids them of barriers and frees them to learn far beyond the scope of the lesson. When Alabama played host to the University of Tennessee's Wildlife and Fisheries Science juniors, it gave them this freedom. While they were introduced to many important concepts of wildlife management, it was those host wildlife professionals and skills that managed to supersede the boundaries of a classroom that will benefit them in the professional world regardless of the paths they each choose. It is because of those skills I am grateful to the Alabama hosts who generously gave their time for our betterment. 