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## **NEWS RELEASE**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

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### **Blackwater NWR Connects Kids With Nature in New Outdoor EE Programs**

In June 2007, Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge completed the construction of an Environmental Education Building with the additional assistance of a grant acquired by the Friends of Blackwater. In anticipation of its final completion in June, the Friends of Blackwater and Blackwater liaison, Visitor Services Manager Maggie Briggs formed an education committee to develop an environmental education program. It was decided to start small since the staff at Blackwater only consisted of two permanent visitor services staff. The goal was to develop a program that did not require too much of refuge staff time, made use of volunteers and partners, and enabled teachers to do the programs.

The committee decided to start with the local schools and contacted the Dorchester County Board of Education. The science supervisor, Trish Vickers, not only came to a meeting, but brought lots of enthusiasm and the county curriculum to help decide how our programs could fit into the school curriculum. It was decided to bring the entire 4<sup>th</sup> grade in the county in October for a food chain activity that fit in with their October curriculum. This activity was already written up in detail in the environmental education manual published by the Friends of Blackwater a few years ago (also completed by a challenge cost share grant). A second program was selected that would fit in with the 6<sup>th</sup> grade spring ecology program (forest restoration). The Friends, Dorchester County Science Supervisor, and the National Aquarium in Baltimore worked together to apply for a Nature of Learning Grant which they received in October 2007.

A volunteer and 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher's' workshop was held August 2, 2007. It was decided that each day one of the six elementary schools would bring their students to the refuge. The students were divided into four groups. One group would do the food chain activity, one group would walk the Marsh Edge Trail and do the "marsh sit" activity, one group would watch the refuge film and tour the Visitor Center exhibits and observatory, and one group would have a guided bus tour through the Wildlife Drive. After 40 minutes, the groups would switch. They ate lunch in the environmental education building, and repeated the morning activities so that each group was able to do all four activities. Volunteers assisted with each activity. There were 300 students, 15 Volunteers, eight teachers, and two staff members involved in the six days of participation October 9 - October 17, 2007.

A volunteer and 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher's' workshop was held on March 27, 2008. It was decided to do forest restoration. This time the entire 6<sup>th</sup> grade in Dorchester County's two middle schools came to the refuge over a 4-day period April 14 - April 17, 2008. They were also divided into four groups with one group doing tree planting while a second group learned how to use a GPS unit (five units supplied by Friends of Blackwater) to locate three invasive species and two native species of shrubs whose location was previously entered into the GPS units. A third group was given a bus tour of the Wildlife Drive while the fourth group viewed the refuge film and toured the Visitor Center and observatory. Each group had questions they were expected to answer from the activities. After 40 minutes, these groups switched. Again, they ate lunch in the environmental education building and repeated the activities in the afternoon so each group did all four activities. There were approximately 280 students, 12 teachers, 11 volunteers and four staff members, who participated in this program.

Some of the comments from teachers included "It's the best trip we have ever taken that fit into our curriculum." The student's letters to the refuge indicated they all enjoyed the programs, but each had different things that interested them the most. The letters were very inspiring and made the effort worth while. It was a good beginning and we hope will continue to provide what the education system needs, continue to get the kids back to nature and eventually work with little involvement of the staff.

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