



Classroom Earth

When you love both children and the natural world, the motivation is strong to teach children to care for the environment. This motive can lead a San Francisco Bay Area teacher into very fertile territory, thanks to Point Blue's STRAW Project – Students and Teachers Restoring a Watershed.

Twenty-seven years ago, I decided to change careers from architecture to teaching elementary school. I brought with me a lifelong passion for the natural world. For six years I taught second-graders about the Amazon rainforest.

My students performed rainforest plays and read like fiends in read-a-thons to “adopt” acres of the Amazon.

Along the way, I learned that children might gain as much or more by studying their own environment and protecting local species – even ones that were not cute and fuzzy. My niece, as a fourth-grader, had developed enormous enthusiasm for an invertebrate in a stream near her school. Her teacher, Laurette Rogers, had formed the California Freshwater Shrimp Club to give the children hands-on experience in conservation.

I wanted to do something like that!

After I began teaching fourth grade, in Marin County, California, a colleague and I met with naturalist Meryl Sundove, now one of the consulting teachers who comprise the STRAW Faculty. We decided to have our classes adopt the steelhead trout, and soon our students were raising fingerling fish from “eyed eggs.” Even-

Above: Fourth-graders in Alison Quoyeser's classroom learn to appreciate entire ecosystems.

Facing page: STRAW restoration day is the most memorable day of the year for most students.

Photos: courtesy Alison Quoyeser

POINT BLUE'S STRAW PROJECT • TEACHING YOUNG CONSERVATIONISTS- IN-TRAINING



Alison Quoyeser
Fourth-grade teacher in Marin
County, California.

As a long-time member of Point Blue's STRAW Program, Alison is inspired and effective as a mentor of the next generation.

tually I met Laurette Rogers, STRAW's founder and my role model for project-based learning.

Ever since 1994, just the second year of STRAW, I have been an avid participant. My fourth-graders always participate in a restoration day, one of their most memorable experiences in what I call "a watershed year."

Teachers who are active in STRAW have memorable experiences every year, too. One is Watershed Week, a mid-summer immersion program that sustains me and inspires me. Over the years I have learned about water and watersheds, soils, Native Americans' relationship with the land, climate change, effective restoration, and more.

We also learn creative ways to bring such information to life in our classrooms. To my students' delight, STRAW Faculty visit my classroom to lead lessons focused on bird identification, understanding bird adaptations for their environment, and other ornithology skills.

When Point Blue educators Melissa Pitkin and Missy Wipf first began attending Watershed Week, I became fascinated by the idea that restorations could help to bring back bird populations. I asked for their help teaching about birds and invited them to my classroom. My students and I also began participating in the Marin Audubon Society's Junior Birdwatching program, in which fourth-

graders must learn to identify and give one fact about each of 50 Marin County birds. Two years ago, 100% of my students passed the challenging test and became official Junior Birdwatchers.

Their parents marvel at these children's enthusiasm for birds and ability to point out and name the species they see. At least one of my former students now is studying to become an ornithologist. All leave fourth grade with a heightened sense of environmental stewardship.

Their stewardship now extends across political boundaries – tracing the lives of local birds that migrate. Seven years ago, when a close friend from my Spanish class moved to Mexico, the two of us decided to create a project linking classrooms in the Bay Area with ones in Jalisco, where Martina lives.

We christened our project Amigos Alados (Winged Friends) and with Point Blue's help chose 16 focal bird species that winter in Jalisco and migrate to California for the warmer months. Some are species, such as Swainson's Thrush, that Point Blue studies using new technology to document migration between Marin County and Jalisco!

Amigos Aladas fosters pen-pal relationships and bird education for participating classes, hires ornithologists to teach the children in Mexico, and relies on Point Blue's STRAW Program to educate participating children here in California.

In myriad ways, including the arts, my students learn about ecology, pollution, protecting the environment, and the challenges of climate change. At the heart of what I do is my relationship to STRAW. Each morning I start class by lighting a candle and reading my fourth-graders a watershed poem, a practice I admire and have borrowed from Sandy Neuman, who is STRAW's Professional Development Manager.

I know my students are gaining a deep, personal appreciation of nature – and the motivation and ability to conserve this planet we call home. My relationship with STRAW and Point Blue staff, partners, and participating teachers assures me I am not alone. We are a community of people committed to teaching students to revere and protect the Earth. 🌍

