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Tahoe elementary students saying 'no' to plastic at the lunch table



Courtesy photo From left, Vivian Pierce, Tatianna Lamperti, Kylee Beck and Emma Easterbrook of the Truckee Elementary green team, working on a lunch waste audit Tuesday, March 5.

Courtesy photo Truckee Elementary green team members, Lacy Norris, Britta Winans, Talia Herrera, Annabelle Walterschide, Danitza Ruiz and Evelyn Sanchez, along with Envirolution Club members Quinn Parker and Sydney Poncelet in front of a display of what is recyclable.

KINGS BEACH, Calif. — The Kings Beach Elementary School lunch service will soon become greener with help from an unexpected ally: students.

As early as next week, 24 fourth graders, all of whom are members of the school's green team, will help launch a new lunch initiative of replacing individual plastic packages containing a spork, napkin and straw with reusable silverware by passing out the utensils to younger students and training them on where to place them after use.

"I want to save the world and teach everybody to not use plastic, so the Earth isn't, like, all plastic," said green team member Hannah Hirsh during the club's Monday morning meeting, after members eagerly shared ideas on how to prevent the reusable utensils from being thrown out accidentally.

Suggested ideas included standing next to trash cans to inspect trays; having a separate container for silverware by the trash cans; and, which turned out to be the official solution, placing a bucket at each table.

“We want to have zero-waste lunches,” said student Sophia Sullivan, explaining the goal of the Kings Beach Elementary green team — the new silverware initiative being a step in that direction.

Sullivan, along with her fellow green team members — who also are present in Truckee Elementary School and Tahoe Lake Elementary — recently learned about the impact of single-use plastic bags on the environment after watching the movie “Bag It.”

“Plastic bags are really bad because they’re a big waste because some people only use them once and then throw them away, but they never go away,” said Zoe Carter, a Kings Beach Elementary green team member.

Other Kings Beach Elementary green team members cited the dangers plastic bags pose to wildlife.

“What I’ve learned about plastic bags is that when they get in the ocean, they look like jellyfish to the other fish, and they will eat them and they’ll get stuck in their stomachs,” said Koson Verkler.

After watching “Bag It,” green team members were given a data sheet to keep track of their own use of single-use plastic bags, making the connection that they use plastic-packaged sporks every day at lunch and promoting them to want to help, said Melissa “Missy” Mohler, executive director of the Sierra Watershed Education Partnerships.

SWEP, in partnership with Tahoe Truckee Unified School District, school site staff and administration, and the Shane McConkey Foundation, make the green teams and their efforts possible. Mentorship is provided by members of the Truckee High School Envirolution Club, who visit Truckee Elementary about once a week and the other two school sites about once a month, Mohler said.

“What I’ve seen occur is these kids look up to the big kids, and go, ‘I want to make a difference, too,’” she said. “You’re making a difference, how can I make a difference?”

The mentor role gets passed down to the green team members, Mohler added, since they are in the highest grade level at each school site — fifth grade at Truckee Elementary and fourth grade at Kings Beach and Tahoe Lake — educating the younger students about waste and where it goes.

“Trash disappears for these children,” Mohler said. “In India, it doesn’t disappear. Certain places, they see the plastic bags in the trees, but we live in a society (where) ... all the trash goes somewhere else.

“I think that the most important thing for everybody — adults and children — to learn is that never ‘poof — it disappears.’ Certain things don’t biodegrade, and we’re using them at a massive abundance right now for convenience and sanitation, but, again, there’s a cost somewhere.”

Beyond the schoOLS

Currently, the town of Truckee is considering banning plastic checkout bags, while offering shoppers recyclable paper bags for a fee, an effort the schools’ green team members support.

“Truckee should ban plastic bags because if we don’t, our native fish might die, and it’s not good for the environment,” said Annebelle Bokinskie, one of 16 Truckee Elementary green team members, in an email to the Sun.

That sentiment was echoed by Chaney Dietz, one of 23 Tahoe Lake green team members, in the email, when he said, “We should get rid of plastic bags because they never go away. Bag it!”

Besides learning about plastic bags, green team members are learning about waste reduction, recycling, composting, energy and water conservation and pollution prevention, among other environmental practices, through hands-on activities.

Some of the projects the green teams have done include making their own recycled paper populated with native seeds, so they could plant the paper; making bow ties and hair bows out of chip bags and showing off their designs at the Envirolution Club’s Trashion Show; and using old calendar pages to make origami boxes.

“These service projects and project-based learning are really some of the best tested practices that really work for kids,” said Ashley Phillips, SWEP project director. “(They’re) things that they’ll remember and will really make a difference in their learning and thinking.”

Several Kings Beach Elementary green team members said they are learning a lot by being involved in the club.

“I’ve learned that most things that can be recycled don’t usually get recycled, and that plastic bags ... animals swallow them and they can die,” said Phoenix Sanchez.

Students also are taking their knowledge home, telling their families to not use plastic bags and to reuse items.

King Beach Elementary green team member Lola Tieslau told a story of how she stopped her dad from using plastic bags at the grocery store the other day, while classmate Kate Gaffney is getting her family to reuse jam jars as glasses, plastic bottles for water and intact Ziploc bags.

“It makes me feel really, really good,” Gaffney said.

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