Martinez students only have to go downtown to see beavers they studied in class

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Sixty fascinated Las Juntas Elementary School students asked questions, sniffed wild fennel and listened as Worth a Dam guide Jon Ridler explained in his British accent, "The 'mum' (mother beaver) loved to eat fennel and spineless blackberries."

During a field trip, the third-graders listened as Ridler and Worth a Dam founder Heidi Perryman shared details of the beaver family living in Alhambra Creek in the heart of downtown Martinez.

"I like getting to see and smell what they eat," said Kendell Gillette, a student in Theresa Baldwin's class. The abundant Arroyo willow and tule bulbs are Martinez beavers' menu favorites.

"I like going on the bridges to see all the dams," said student Isabella Crespo after Ridler pointed to evidence of beaver gnawing power found at the base of large tree branches in the dams.

When the adult male and his family hear water running over their dam, they start building to stop it, the students learned.

"Only one other species changes the earth more than beavers. Can you guess what it is?" Perryman asked. Eventually a student correctly guessed "man."

"The Great Wall of China and a 2,800 foot beaver dam in Northern Canada can be seen from space," Perryman added.

That beaver propensity to continually stop flowing water became the catalyst for a high visibility controversy between local leaders who were concerned about flooding and environmentalists
who wanted the beavers to keep their home. Martinez is now internationally known as a home to the beavers.

The solution was a water flow device that some call a "beaver deceiver."

It is an open, flexible pipe or tube with a wire cage over it that is placed upstream from the beaver dam so that water is carried to a downstream location past the dam without creating the "running water" signal for the beavers to build.

Beaver habits were more interesting to the kids than the flow device, and they were able to spot an otter. The nocturnal beavers were asleep, but field study leaders made up for that with large photos, vivid descriptions and metal life-size images.

Perryman encouraged Terrie Santos' third-graders to educate their parents. "Lots of parents don't know that beavers only eat plants," she said.

Children learned of the recent death of the mother beaver. She had given birth to 15 kits before breaking a tooth. Infection is a suspected cause, but fortunately she lived until her latest three kits were 8 weeks old. They are doing well.

"After the class trip "... some of the students brought their parent back that night and they saw three of (the beavers)," said Worth a Dam member Lory Bruno.

Divided into groups, students alternately trekked Alhambra Creek with Ridler and Bruno, or joined Perryman at the corner of Castro and Escobar streets where they discovered more remarkable facts, practiced the "beaver chant" and sketched chalk drawings of beavers on the pavement.

"The beavers make a neighborhood," Perryman told the youngsters. Since their arrival in Martinez 2006, the presence of the beaver dams has attracted a local food-chain type of ecosystem.

Perryman recounts the process: "Bugs came, then more bugs, then fish, then big fish, muskrats, otters and even a mink."

"I discovered the beavers and just began taking pictures of them and posting them on YouTube," Perryman said.

She, Ridler and others have become beaver experts, visiting the site nearly every day, studying, lobbying and teaching about beavers.

Perryman is looking forward to February for the State of the Beaver 2011 Conference in Canyonville, Ore. where beaver advocates will meet to learn from the Martinez experience and each other.
Worth a Dam has established a beaver management scholarship fund and recently granted $500 to Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care to help that community establish a beaver dam water flow device.

"Just for the children's sake," Bruno said. "It was worth all the work and cost for them to see what nature is like."

Visit www.martinezbeavers.org to get the whole story of Martinez beavers.