

A close-up photograph of a fish's head, showing its large, prominent eye and the characteristic spotted pattern on its side. The fish is partially submerged in water, with ripples visible around its head.

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Students Soak Up Army Corps Workshops (with SpongeBob's help)



A young female school student from New York Public School 43 stands on the Rockaway Beach boardwalk and gently pokes a lifeless yellow mound lying on the bottom of a water tank, "What's this?" she asks.

"It's a yellow sea sponge—like the cartoon character, SpongeBob SquarePants, but unlike Bob this sponge doesn't have eyes, legs, arms, or a brain," explains Lisa Baron, a project manager with the Army Corps of Engineers Harbor Programs Branch.

The girl was stunned, as were her classmates surrounding her. It seems the students didn't make a connection between the popular cartoon character and the marine life that live in the waters right behind their school, which sits on Rockaway Beach, a peninsula on the south shore of Queens, New York.

This was the aim of the Rockaway Waterfront Alliance that asked the Corps to visit the students.

"The Corps' projects have protected the Rockaway shoreline and waterways for some time, but the local community and youth have never had the opportunity to find out how necessary this work is to keeping their waterways open," said Jeanne DuPont, director, Rockaway Waterfront Alliance.

A team of Corps biologists and engineers held several workshops for

students at Rockaway Beach along the boardwalk right behind their school.

DREDGING WORKSHOP

Douglas Leite, project manager, New York District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, informed the students about the dredging work the Corps is performing off their shore and how it's beneficial to their community.

Over the years Rockaway Beach has eroded due to a number of reasons including severe storms over the years. To help replenish the shoreline, the Corps dredges the East Rockaway Inlet and places sand back onto the beach.

"We dredge sand from the East Rockaway Inlet and place it onto the beach to increase the size and reduce flood risk and coastal erosion, as well as provide a recreation area for the community," said Leite.

SEA LIFE WORKSHOP

Baron told the students that during dredging operations that the Corps does all it can to protect marine life in their natural habitat. The Corps uses deflectors to prevent sea turtles from getting caught in a dredge. Dredging work is done when species are not present.

Baron showed live species of Rockaway marine life for the students to hold and touch that included slime-covered moon snails, hermit and mole crabs, sea horses, mud snails, sea anemones, sea stars, and a yellow sea sponge. Baron said the students asked many questions and appeared very fascinated with the marine life.

"They were intrigued to learn that male sea horses play Mr. Mom and give birth to their babies and that sea stars regenerate their arms and pull their stomachs outside of their body to feed."

Some of the sea critters gave real life demonstrations for the students, such as a sea anemone that shot out its stinging

cell at a baby sea star and attempted to eat it as students stared in amazement.

PIPING PLOVER WORKSHOP

Robert Smith, project biologist with the Corps' New York District, collected the critters from the East Rockaway Inlet. He talked to students along the beach about threatened and endangered species and how the Corps is taking measures to protect them.

One of these is the piping plover, a threatened shorebird due to beach erosion. Smith created a mock piping plover egg hunt for the students to show them what piping plover eggs and nests look like.

During their hunt, he told the students that by the Corps building up the beaches with sand they are creating a habitat for the birds to nest and care for their young. He also said that the Corps schedules the sand placement outside the nesting season.

During Smith's workshop, a horseshoe crab slowly crept from the shore towards the students. Smith saw this as an opportunity to tell the students that horseshoe crabs are ancient creatures predating the dinosaurs—dating back over 500 million years.

The Corps' workshops created such a buzz among the students that their school's principal asked the Corps team to visit a class of second grade students.

Dupont said, "The Corps visit was extremely informative for the students. Their workshops also support the efforts that the Rockaway Waterfront Alliance has been addressing by encouraging public access to the waterfront though education with local youth."

Baron added, "To know that the Corps' outreach may inspire the students to become future scientists or merely improve their environmental awareness is rewarding." ⚓