

# Turtle Power

Outreach group teaches job skills along with environmental awareness.

Last summer gave new meaning to the term “summer job” for a group of Connecticut teens. While most of their friends were earning money through traditional means, or simply hanging out, these urban youth not only received gainful and educational summer employment, they also got to participate in a National Geographic study of snapping turtles in the Connecticut River.

Thanks to a new partnership between National Geographic and Our Piece of the Pie (OPP), a Hartford-based nonprofit that helps teenagers learn crucial job skills, more than a dozen inner-city kids participated in OPP’s Science on the River youth-employment program and the Geographic Society’s Snapping Turtle Project. The group spent six weeks researching the turtles’ eating, mating and nesting habits, but the ultimate goal was to monitor the reptiles’ behavior using the Crittercam, a special videocamera worn by the turtles, which was made famous by the 2005 Academy Award-winning documentary *March of the Penguins*.

Greg Marshall, the camera’s inventor and director of the Remote Imaging Program at National Geographic, is planning to use some of the footage shot during the turtle project—led by Chris Luginbuhl of the Luginbuhl Foundation to preserve leatherback turtles and University of Connecticut biologist Tobias Landberg—in a segment for PBS’s *Wild Chronicles*.

“We are just so excited that they have chosen our program to be a part



Above: Students check a turtle trap as part of the Our Piece of the Pie and National Geographic’s Snapping Turtle Project.



Left: “Jawless,” a common snapping turtle, hits the water with a Crittercam secured to his shell.

of this,” said OPP youth business manager Paul Gemme, whose group partnered with Riverfront Recapture, a nonprofit that works to reconnect the city of Hartford with the Connecticut River. The program also helps high school students attain job skills while placing a strong emphasis on the river’s ecology.

“We have a unique opportunity to help make new discoveries about the role turtles play in the Connecticut River system,” Marshall said. “One aspect of the project I’m excited about is how refreshing and wonderful it is to have young men and women involved with a cutting-edge scientific research and conservation project.”

Past sessions saw OPP students spend the summer gathering information about the fish population in the river for

the state Department of Environmental Protection, and every student in Gemme’s program received his or her safe-boating certificate.

This past summer Gemme and the students succeeded in trapping and rigging several common snapping turtles with Crittercams in Wethersfield Cove, including a 39-pound giant they dubbed “Jawless” because it was missing its lower jaw. Snippy, a 25-pound snapper, was also fitted with one of the \$20,000 cameras that a few hours later was retrieved by researchers and sent to National Geographic headquarters in Washington, D.C., where the footage was viewed and edited.

“So many of the kids that come into our programs are dealing with a lot of stuff at home, so it can be hard to get them motivated,” Gemme said. “One of the requirements of the program is that they treat it like a real job.”

—Adriane Dean

For more Northeast boating news, see “Notice to Mariners” on page 62.