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Technology Tapped to Teach from Afar

By Jennifer Wake



Millie Tang's fourth grade class (Millie Tang in middle) Photo Jennifer Wake

Los Perales Elementary students are used to seeing computers in classrooms, and have even teleconferenced on Skype or viewed online blogs with friends and family, but last month they used part of class time to check in online with their teacher, who was beaming stories about her global warming research during a two-week expedition to Nova Scotia, Canada.

Fourth grade teacher Millie Tang set off on this adventure on April 12 as part of an Earthwatch Institute expedition to monitor mammals and climate change on the rugged shore of Nova Scotia, north of the state of Maine. During her stay, Tang communicated with students through video conferencing tools such as Skype and online blogs.

One student, Amanda Dunning, was proud that Tang was chosen to participate in the research, while Gabriella Asuncion said it was fun to interact with her teacher who was so far away.

While Tang said she learned quite a few interesting lessons on this expedition, one work that stood out was tracking down and identifying animal waste - or poop - then physically counting and recording it on a tracking sheet. "Why count poop?"

Tang said. "It's an indicator of a specific animal's population density in an area." She and other researchers also trapped animals, weighing them, checking for age, and marking them, before releasing them.

□ "We saw a lot of pictures, and heard Mrs. Tang got over her fear of touching poop," Molly Bobrovitch said.

□ Lauren Williams thought it was interesting to realize how much you can learn from studying an animals' waste, like what they ate and how much of it they ate. Much of what Tang taught her students upon her return revolved around the predator-prey cycle, and its importance when researching how climate change might be affecting a certain species.

□ Hayden Hunt said he learned that by studying an animal's waste, you can find bones of different animals they ate and learn more about the predator-prey cycle.

□ Tang learned that it's the smarter animals that survived through the short harsh winter and the lesser weaker animals were either picked out by its predator or died in its 'home.'

□ "The results we saw out in the field really show glaring data there is climate change affecting the smaller mammals, which are good indicators of environmental change or climate change, and habitat degradation and environmental pollution," she said.

□ After returning, Tang not only discussed the changes she saw in Nova Scotia, but how her students can make a difference here in Lamorinda. Tang rallied students together to walk to school, and challenged students to come up with at least one conservation pledge. "This gives them a chance to think of how they want to contribute to a sustainable environment, and be more proactive with what I have taught them."

□ Fourth grader Russell Alger is planning on recycling more, instead of "throwing away everything since it's a long walk to the recycle bin." Hayden Hunt plans to turn off lights and unplug computers not in use that are using 'ghost power.'

□ Justine Bon now has a better understanding of how climate change is affecting animals in Nova Scotia and Antarctica, and Sara Ryerson wants to work harder to help the environment.

□ "The student pledges are not a promise to their teacher, but more to their own environment," Tang said.

□ Each year, Earthwatch recruits close to 4,000 volunteers to collect field data in the areas of rainforest ecology, wildlife conservation, marine science, archaeology, and more. Through this process, they educate, inspire, and involve a diversity of people, who actively contribute to conserving the planet. Tang's fellowship was sponsored by Wells Fargo Bank.

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