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Students to study abandoned Guppy farm

High schoolers to help with SUNY ESF project in conservation area.

April 22, 2004

By Sara Errington
Staff writer

Local high schools will get to help State College of Environmental Science and Forestry students and faculty study the former Guppy farm, which is now part of the town of Skaneateles' conservation area.

Gregory McGee, a forest ecologist on the SUNY ESF faculty, asked and received the town board's permission to study the farm.

It's one of several pieces of land around the state that McGee and other SUNY ESF students and faculty will study this summer to see what happens to abandoned farmland.

"Part of my interest is in understanding how past land use influences what lives in forests today," he said.

McGee said that at the turn of the 20th century, only about four percent of the state's land was forested.

"A lot of people gave up on farming and moved to the cities, especially during the Depression," he said.

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Some studies suggest that many native species don't return to abandoned farmland because their seeds can't disperse over great distances, McGee said.

"There's a potential for a lot of our land in New York to not be all that it could be in terms of organisms that live there," he said.

McGee, a Skaneateles village resident, said he also chose the Guppy farm because it could give local school children a chance to learn about the research that ecologists do.

The summer's project will be a survey of plants on the farm.

Later, the group may seek to do some experiments on the land, seeing how plants grow under different conditions.

"I think those are all things that high school students are perfectly capable of working on with a little bit of guidance, and perhaps could be a good learning experience for them," he said.

Students at all the school districts immediate to Skaneateles will be invited to participate.

Supervisor Bill Pavlusa said he learned a lot when he walked the land recently with McGee.

McGee plucked part of a plant and handed it to Pavlus to chew.

"If you nibbled on that bark for just a little bit it was very spicy," Pavlus said.

It was a spice bush.

"It's a more Southern species. It's not abundant this far north, so I really had to convince myself that's what it was. So he ate it," McGee joked.

McGee also found a leek and some chives for Pavlus to taste.

"If you ever take a walk with him you want to be prepared to sample just about everything that he sees," Pavlus said.

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