MUDSCAPES!

Mudscapes is a very popular water celebration activity in which students sculpt their own watershed using real mud. For several years, Kansas Streamlink has been presenting this activity at water celebrations state-wide, and has recently received a grant to produce a mudscapes starter kit. The starter kit will include a how-to guide, a video, and enough materials to do a single mudscapes table. Students absolutely love playing in the mud, but it takes a well-prepared and well-trained presenter to maximize the activity's great learning potential.

The mudscapes starter kits will be available from Kansas Streamlink in 2006. Basic instructions for the activity follow, and Streamlink is available to help get you started. Contact Kansas Streamlink at 785-840-0700 or Alison@streamlink.org.

Mudscapes at the 05 Topeka Water Festival. *Photo by Hank Ernst*

Setting up

Before the students arrive, the stage has to be set. Three long folding tables are set up in a "T" and tarps are tightly fitted over the tables by hooking bungee cords to the tarp rivets. This really helps to keep the kids, tables, and the ground around the tables clean. Next comes the mud...20 or so containers each holding a couple of gallons of mud are dumped onto the tables with a frugal amount of water (too much makes it sloppy and runny). The mud is kneaded until it is soft and moldable, and ready for the kids to work with. The mud is a mixture of streamside and top soil collected from around the state, with a bit of dime store sand and peat mixed in. The mud containers are stashed under the tables, wash tubs are filled, and hand towels (cloth works WAY better than paper!), hand sanitizer, and stickers are unpacked before the students arrive.

The students arrive in a rush... In the next 30 minutes they'll work through the 4 part cycle. It takes three people working in close tandem to keep the group moving. As person A leads one part, B & C re-prep the stage. Then B takes over for A and begins the next piece. Keeping everything moving—especially the mud is hard but exciting work.

Digging in

The first step involves calming the students down as they come in from their last activity. Sitting on the ground they talk about what they saw out the window of the bus as they came to the festival, rainfall, and the water cycle. This gets the students thinking about water in their surroundings and landscape of everyday life. The second step is to calmly and thoughtfully guide the students into the creative process. The students are given free reign to roll up their sleeves and use their hands to sculpt their ideal community landscape (must be an earth landscape, not a moonscape). Subtle steering is ok 'What are you working on?" "Are you working together?" "Do you have a plan for what you want to do?" but it's best to avoid direct positive or negative statements about what they are doing. When everyone's focused, we slowly work our way around the table quietly tapping children on the shoulder individually and whispering for them to go select items from a table set up a few feet away. (The approach seems to keep chaos in check; students usually stay focused on their creations even when they notice the activity shifting.)

Watershed planning

Mudscapes photo
Courtesy of Kansas Streamlink

The students begin to make land use decisions, selecting prime locations for little wooden houses, farm fences, cows, pigs, horses, and chickens, long thin pieces of rubbery plastic that can simulate roads, green dish scrub sponges that look surprisingly like grass turf, matchbox cars, trucks and tractors, and tiny frogs, fish and bugs: anything that will bring the landscape to life.

As they sculpt the landscape, students are reminded of several important factors of environmental planning:

- Animals must be fenced in so they don't ruin the stream banks and water
- Animals must be kept out of water to prevent pollution, and therefore must be supplied with water troughs
- Ground covers like grass and rocks must be planted along the stream banks to prevent erosion.
- The community must be planned and connected. Students should work together with their planning as much as possible.
- Props can also be used in the water. Fish show signs of healthy water
- Rivers are better when they wind back and forth, this slows down water.
- Add in tributaries to fill the river
- Buildings must be secured on a strong foundation, remember to use ground cover around them and keep the buildings from tumbling into the river.

Wrapping up

Mudscapes photo
Courtesy of Kansas Streamlink

The third step, shifting to hand washing, is the most challenging one to facilitate. They are so tuned in to the little world they have just created. It is a team effort to pry their little hands out of the mud for cleanup: coarse "washing" in tubs of dish water and cloths. We put stickers on the kids with clean hands so all helpers know who needs to stay out of the mud.

The fourth and last piece is the wrap-up. It is important to let the students talk about what they did. A presenter at each table guides the students to talk about what they have created, and responds with questions and suggestions to drive home concepts of best practices for water quality. The hillsides have grasses and trees, natural water is separated from livestock, streams and lakes are filled with wildlife and so on. By giving the creative process the timing priority over the teaching concepts, information they have absorbed through creating the mudscape becomes available for linking to conservation ideas. Being able to see the land from the student's perspective gives a presenter the capacity to tailor the information to both their specific awareness and watershed. If time is up, a presenter may simply paraphrase what they see to ensure that the students take at least a couple of minutes to process what they have learned.

For more information, contact Kansas Streamlink at 785-840-0700 or Alison@streamlink.org