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Youth conservation team restores habitat in Clermont County Parks

Contributed By: [Rich Cogen](#) | Ohio River Foundation

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For three weeks this summer, Ohio River Foundation hired six high school students to work at Clermont County Park District sites as a part of its Youth Conservation Team program.

The students were selected through a competitive application process.

This summer's YCT-Clermont crew members were Valerie Thompson (Milford High School), Ryan Fleming (St. Xavier High School), Christopher Isaacs (New Richmond High School), Mark Lambert (Bethel-Tate High School), Elizabeth Johnson (Cincinnati Country Day School) and Anna Neel (Glen Este High School). They were led by crew leaders Courtney Roush and Jamie Lankenau.

The YCT crew completed 30 projects ranging from repairing trails (that reduced erosion and associated stormwater pollution) to removal of non-native invasive plant and tree species (that were outcompeting native plants and creating unfavorable bird habitat).

Plants that are not indigenous or native can become invasive and adversely affect the habitats and bioregions they invade. They out-compete native species, putting at risk plants and animals that are dependent on the native species for survival. The crew worked in Sycamore Park and Shor Park removing invasive plant species such as Amur (Bush) honeysuckle, Multiflora rose, Russian olive, Callery pear, and burning bush. Removal of these aggressive species allows sunlight to reach the forest floor so young native trees can grow. The YCT took down more than 38,150 square feet of invasive plants and trees.

The crew was also given multiple projects besides invasive removal to help maintain the trails and divert water off the trails as fast as possible to reduce erosion. Also, two stream banks were armored with rocks to help prevent trail bank erosion. Stepping stones were added on multiple trail sections to provide greater trail stability.

Erosion mitigation was the crew's biggest task in maintaining trails. Jim Meyer, Clermont County trail consultant, provided the crew with the necessary training to make and clean out water diversion ditches along the trails. Two small drain pipes were also removed with these ditches placed there instead since the pipes easily clogged up. The largest project was digging out one end of a large culvert and reinforcing its sides with rock armoring.

One day each week the students took a break from their work for hands-on educational experiences. The students gained hands-on experience with environmental equipment and techniques and explored the connections between the habitat protection work and watershed ecology.

One week the students visited the Thomas More College Biology Field Station on the Ohio River to see professor Chris Lorentz. There they learned about types of pollution, went electrofishing, operated a YSI (a water quality instrument capable of measuring multiple parameters) to evaluate the water chemistry of the river, learned about the mussel life cycle, and learned about their ongoing Bluntnose Minnow study. The second week they visited Raptors Inc. in Milford to assist staff with site maintenance and bird husbandry activities.

The last education day the students visited professor emeritus Mike Miller from University of Cincinnati at the UC Center for Field Studies. With him they experimented with many water chemistry parameters such as what affects the rate of light absorption in water, nutrients in water, runoff and absorption rates of different surfaces and soil types, dissolved oxygen, conductivity, and turbidity. They were also able to compare water previously collected from several local streams using water chemistry parameters. On site, students went into Dry Fork Creek where they caught macroinvertebrates and stream fish, and they observed how to assess stream health by its morphology through sediment erosion and deposition.

In summary, through the entire YCT experience, these students became local conservation ambassadors to their community and will take their experience with them to share with fellow classmates as they return to school or begin their collegiate experience.

Clermont county program partner was Clermont County Park District. This program was funded in



The Youth Conservation Team crew take a break after placing rock along a creek bed and bank that is experiencing erosion from increased flows in the creek during rain storms. From left: Anna Neel, Valerie Thompson, Chris Isaacs, Ryan Fleming and Mark Lambert . Not pictured, Elizabeth Johnson.

part by Ashland, Inc., Major League Baseball, and the Nellie Leaman Taft Foundation.

Corporate and foundation support is now being accepted to support the 2018 program. Visit www.ohioriverfdn.org for more information or contact us at orf@ohioriverfdn.org or 513-460-3365.

Ohio River Foundation is a nonprofit organization serving the 200,000 square mile watershed with education and conservation programs. Its River Explorer and Youth Conservation Team programs inspire thousands of students every year, educating and training the next generation of environmental stewards. Its Restoration Program assists communities throughout the watershed in protecting water quality and facilitating the restoration and protection of their natural resources.

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