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'Changing... awareness' By Don Sapatkin Inquirer Staff Writer

"Mallard ducks! See?"

Corey Byrd, 13, waved an arm upstream for the benefit of his younger buddies, then scrambled the rest of the way onto the footbridge over Cobbs Creek. He returned a few minutes later with two salamanders.

Kids, nature, discovery - they are an everyday mix here these days, part of a community's reacquaintance with woods and streams long abandoned to drugs, crime, and piles of trash.

It had been so long, in fact, that people forgot Cobbs Creek Park was, well, a park.

Joseph Caesar, a community organizer hired in 1998 to coordinate volunteers, has been working to build a group of stewards who would ensure the future of their park in Southwest Philadelphia.

But first they needed an appreciation of nature - a familiarity that social scientists say is often missing in urban areas, leading minority populations who live there generally to participate less than whites in outdoor recreation.

"A lot of this is about changing people's awareness," Caesar said.

Cobbs Creek Park stretches like a great green snake along the waterway between the city and Delaware County and extends into the suburbs at both ends, 786 acres merged over the years by the Fairmount Park Commission. The first dam and water mill in what would later be known as Pennsylvania were built by the Swedes at Woodland Avenue in 1646. Betsy Ross is buried in Mount Moriah Cemetery.

In the working-class minority neighborhood of Cobbs Creek, where rowhouses abut the park's midsection, the oldest memories recall a quiet, well-maintained park through the 1950s, then a slow decline. Ebb turned into nosedive when the city disbanded its parks police to shore up law enforcement amid the tumult of the 1970s.

"It became a haven for mischief," recalled Carole Williams-Green, speaking gently of the mayhem that kept most residents away for decades.

Fifteen years ago, the longtime science teacher and supervisor bumped into a former student on the El. He asked her whether gifted kids still had to travel across town to do field research in environmental science.

For Williams-Green, that question led to a dream with many scenes: more minorities in the nation's laboratories, local kids turned on by science, a neighborhood transformed by nature.

She founded the Cobbs Creek Community Environmental Education Center in 1991. In 2001, the center moved into a renovated historic horse stable, where students learn science in a state-of-the-art laboratory and out among a variety of habitats.

Meanwhile, Fairmount Park and the William Penn Foundation had embarked on an ambitious, citywide mission: recruit and train volunteers to clean up the parks, restore wetlands, meadows and forests, and, most important, become long-term stewards of the environment.

"The more we can do this, over time, we can change this community," Caesar said.

Williams-Green has a similar vision; indeed, students in her summer program were honored by the White House several years ago.

Next summer will be the 10th that the nonprofit center has worked with 45 high school students on trails, streams and forests. Fifteen top academic students are now taking a college-level environmental science course. In the spring, students from six middle schools will analyze the water along Cobbs Creek, all the way from its Radnor source to its mouth on Darby Creek in Colwyn.

Volunteers have upgraded a 2.5-mile hiking trail along the creek, restored eroded banks, and pulled tons of invasive plants. The city paved a multiuse trail from 63d and Market Streets almost to the airport.

On a recent Sunday afternoon, Charles Taylor held a bag of bread crumbs on the pedestrian bridge that links Philadelphia with Upper Darby. His 8-year-old son, Kamau, tossed morsels to the fish below.

Red fox, deer and hawks have appeared on walks through their neighborhood park the past five or six years. Before that, said Charles, 44, "we didn't even realize it was here."

Kamau had never been inside the environmental center, but he nevertheless is developing the sort of interest in science and the environment that Williams-Green, 72, hopes to grow.

"Exposure," she said, "is opening up vistas to what the magic of the outdoors can do."

If You Go

Cobbs Creek Park

The park stretches south from Haverford Township, through West Philadelphia and into Upper Darby.

Features: Historical sites, golf courses, ice rink, trails.

Information: 215-683-0200 or www.fairmountpark.org/CobbsCreekPark.asp.

Volunteering: Restoration work most Saturdays. Call ahead: 215-429-0962.

Environmental center

Cobbs Creek Community Environmental Education Center is at 700 Cobbs Creek Parkway, opposite Catharine Street.

Features: Educational programs, habitat study and restoration.

Information: 215-685-1900 or www.cobbscreek.org.

Volunteering: Habitat restoration Dec. 3 and 17. Call ahead.