Native Plant Geocaching

Every year, Ms. Burton, a middle school science teacher, does a unit on plants that includes a study of native and invasive plants. One of the primary learning targets is for students to be able to identify local native plants. In the past, she has struggled to form a strong connection between her students and local vegetation. After discovering geocaching over the past summer, Ms. Burton decides to incorporate it into her work with students, hoping to increase engagement and move learning outdoors.

Ms. Burton starts small. She hides a geocache at the base of a native tree on the school campus. Inside the geocache, she identifies the tree with its common and Latin name. She also includes basic information about the tree, including its identifying characteristics, range, and how it is threatened by invasive species in the area. She places the geocache on a geocaching Web site. She shows her students the cache online and teaches them how to install geocaching apps on their smartphones. As a class, they hunt for the geocache. The students enjoy the short trip out of the classroom and are clearly excited by the idea of a native plant scavenger hunt.

Ms. Burton then adds more native plant geocaches to the school campus. In addition to including information and a logbook in the geocaches, Ms. Burton begins to include short activities such as journaling. Students start to leave tidbits of their learning behind in the geocaches for others to discover. For example, one artistic student leaves sketches of each plant in the geocaches.

Her students come up with the idea of also geocaching some of the most prevalent invasive species in the area. Ms. Burton is cautious about placing too many geocaches in one small area, so she contacts the administration of a nearby park to gain approval to place geocaches within its boundaries. The students build a project around creating invasive species geocaches. First, groups identify the invasive species they want to tag. Then they decide what to put inside the geocache. Lastly, they place the geocache in a location for others to find.

Even though the unit on plants is supposed to be ending, students are still interested in the geocache project and it continues through the remainder of the school year. Ms. Burton feels like the geocaches were very successful in connecting student learning to the surrounding natural world.

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