

Friends of DuPont Forest Committed to Connecting Local Students to Nature Through Muddy Sneakers

The start of a new school year may mark the end of western North Carolina's summer season, a time when thousands of children from near and far become immersed in our region's natural lands. But for the 7th year, Friends of DuPont Forest (FODF) is partnering with fellow non-profit Muddy Sneakers to make the lands they steward an outdoor classroom, extending environmental exploration and education well beyond the summer months. For 2014, FODF awarded Muddy Sneakers a programming grant of \$7,500, ensuring that 5th graders from 6 local elementary schools will continue to have the opportunity to experience the waterfalls and woodlands of DuPont State Recreational Forest through multiple 'learning expeditions' spread across the school year.

Muddy Sneakers provides field-based, experiential science education to 5th grade students at public schools across western North Carolina. The organization's mission is to awaken in children a deeply felt connection with the natural world, one that inspires curiosity, stimulates learning, and brings new life to classroom performance – goals that are echoed in the educational component of FODF's vision. Students visiting DuPont State Recreational Forest on a Muddy Sneakers learning expedition might measure the biodiversity of Tom Creek by classifying aquatic insects; observe heat moving through conduction, convection, and radiation as they make hot tea out of native mint leaves; or compare the curl of rhododendron leaves to hourly temperature observations recorded while studying weather. In short, the Forest provides students with an incredible living laboratory through which to learn their science curriculum.

FODF, a community organization dedicated to the stewardship of DuPont State Recreational Forest, has long been in the vanguard among a growing network of community groups, conservation organizations, and businesses rallying to bring community sponsorship to Muddy Sneakers in support of its educational mission. The 2014-15 school year marks the continuation of a storied history between the two organizations as DuPont State Recreational Forest provided the very first protected lands Muddy Sneakers students ever visited in the spring of 2008. FODF also played a key role in Muddy Sneakers' founding serving as the fiscal agent for the then-fledgling organization allowing it the time necessary to acquire its 501(c)3 non-profit status. Now in 2014, those few initial footprints have spread into

unmistakable tracks all across DuPont's trails leaving a lasting impact on thousands of children, many of who are unfamiliar with the forest prior to their Muddy Sneaker experience. In 2013-14, over 1,000 students visited the Forest over the course of 19 school days, representing six different local elementary schools from Transylvania and Henderson Counties.

The power of DuPont State Recreational Forest as an outdoor classroom – and playground – is unparalleled even in western North Carolina. From the high granite dome of Cedar Rock Mountain to the thundering gorge of Triple Falls, the forest provides a wealth of awe-inspiring moments for local students. Muddy Sneakers Field Instructor Ben Nelson shares, "After many expeditions in DuPont, an instructor will return at the end of the day with a story about a student who had the chance to see a waterfall for the first time. The moment of that first glimpse has a joy in it that teaches something beyond words. We're all very grateful to have access to such an awe-inspiring landscape for our students."

To learn more about Muddy Sneakers, visit www.muddysneakers.org. For more information about Friends of DuPont Forest, visit www.dupontforest.com.