

Ray Skelton River Quest Essay

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Last week, our class went to a field trip called River Quest and I think it was a very enlightening experience. I, like many other people my age, had no idea how much everyone uses the St. Louis River and Lake Superior, and how important it is to keep our water clean. While I traveled to the eleven different stations, I learned how the water gets clean, and how to help it stay clean, as well as how to stay safe so you are able to enjoy what the lake has to offer.

Safety always comes first, and in the largest, deepest, and coldest of all the Great Lakes, there are many things that you need to be safe about. The most important thing that you can do to stay safe on Lake Superior is to wear a Life Jacket. No matter what your swimming ability is, life jackets are necessary because even Michael Phelps couldn't stay afloat in the 30 degree water that Lake Superior offers. They float and you don't so if you fall in, you'd be glad to have one. Another huge safety concern is hypothermia, when you lose heat faster than your body can produce it. I had learned in school that water gets really cold, so you should always be prepared for hypothermia and always trying to avoid it. I believed my teachers, but I had no idea how cold the water felt until I could barely keep the tip of my hand in it for 15 seconds. Now that I know how awful the water feels, I am sure that I will be more prepared for hypothermia so that this *never* happens to me.

People are not the only species that enjoy our lake, many fish and animals use it too. People are always stereotyping "fish," they are not just a single animal, but a whole group of different fish that look different and live in different places. Even just in our area there are hundreds of kinds of fish. At the Aquarium station we played a game that involved guessing the sizes of fish. I knew that fish come in different sizes but I was thinking a few inches of a difference, not 90 inches. But some are 90 inches longer than another, we saw pictures of fish that were anywhere from 8 inches long to 98 inches long, and everything in between. I was so amazed that they could be this different. After we learned about all the fish that our supposed to live in our area, we began learning about the ones that aren't. Aquatic invasive species are the kinds of fish that are not originally from Minnesota. I have seen many of these animals before but after learning I realized that they are bad for the environment and they do not belong here.

In order for any of these animals to be able to live in Lake Superior they need to have clean water. There are many industries that use and return the water every day. There were two different stations that explained the paper making and water cleaning processes. It was interesting, but I think the message that really stuck with me was reuse, reduce and recycle. The main recourse used in making paper is water, so over 19 million gallons are used to produce paper between the two Twin Ports paper mills in just one day. When they told us that each day they put back the same amount, I was amazed. This proved to me how much different industries care about the environment, and doing their part to keep it healthy.

At the coast guard station, we learned about how oil spills are contained and cleaned. I know that the people who run River Quest had no idea that this station was going to be displayed at the same time as the Oil Spill on the Gulf Coast. This turned out to be a really interesting coincidence. I heard in the news that they were using different methods to clean up the oil, but then, at this station, I saw some of these methods and how each one worked. What I liked best about this was that it proved that things you learn in school actually do connect with real life, which is sometimes hard to believe. That station taught us about a worldwide water problem, but the next one taught us about a local water problem. We learned about pipes and culverts, and how they disrupt the water flow of lakes and rivers. Then in a sandbox, they showed its harmful effects on our ecosystem. I had no idea how one pipe could cause damage to land all over a watershed.

Lastly, we learned about ships and how the Twin Ports earn money. I originally thought that ships got filled up and dumped out quickly, then left. But I had no idea how much perfection there has to be in order to keep a ship level. We learned about keeping a ship trim and keeping both gas tanks equal. There was a lot of precision that I never knew about.

At all of the main 10 stations, we learned a ton of things about our rivers and lakes that will help us to be more careful in the future. Although these were all important, the best thing that I learned was on the top deck; to always have fun and enjoy nature. River Quest was a great experience for me so I would like to thank Ray Skelton and everyone else who made River Quest possible for us.