

## EXPLORING A.T. CULTURE THROUGH THE VISUAL ARTS

### Woodgrove High School, Purcellville, Virginia

Geoff DeMark and Shawn Grove were among the 60 teachers in the 2011 Trail To Every Classroom (TTEC) summer institute who live along the 2,180-mile Appalachian Trail (A.T.) corridor, Georgia to Maine. A week before the TTEC Summer Institute, Geoff attended a professional development training where examples of small art cards were shared. The idea of the student art project came after participating in the TTEC summer institute. Woodgrove High School is in Purcellville, VA in western Loudoun County. It is the closest high school in the county to the A.T.

Geoff, Shawn, and 15 of their students piloted the artist trading card project. The trading cards were conceived as a small (2.5 x 3.5) creative expression that students would use to establish and communicate their own personal culture to thru-hikers on the Appalachian Trail. Geoff and Shawn specifically focused the artist trading card project on the A.T. to begin a fun and creative connection to the Trail with their local community. Their students learned about the Trail by studying the A.T. map, the location and length of the Trail, and by analyzing key sites and locations along the Trail (towns, centers, etc.) to figure out where to put the 20 card distribution centers that they constructed. To introduce the concept and spark their students' interest, Geoff and Shawn shared the website of M. Vanci Stirnemann of Switzerland, who has also used artist trading cards as a basis for a different project (<http://www.artist-trading-cards.ch/>).

In their place-based service learning (PBSL) version, Geoff and Shawn's students joined the school's hiking club, which has an active relationship with Bears Den Trail Center (Bluemont, VA) and regional hiking club, the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club. The students bring small sketchbooks on their hikes as a way to reflect and record their experiences through writing and drawing. The sketchbooks serve as inspiration for the artist cards and for work that is displayed at the Bears Den Trail Center. Students make cards, construct and maintain the trading card distribution centers that hold materials to make cards as well as cards to be traded, and conduct service projects at Bears Den. Through these acts, Woodgrove H.S. students build meaningful and sustainable relationships with Bears Den while making a temporal and place-based connection with A.T. thru-hikers.

Through the practice of observation, recording and research, students will develop healthy learning habits, or effective habits of mind, for critical and creative thought.



The examples of artist-scientists such as John James Audubon and Georgia O’Keeffe will inspire students to work with creative observations of the natural surrounds that the Appalachian Trail has to offer. They move beyond simply making art for art’s sake and become connected with the biology and ecology of the trail, learning as they draw leaves, the structure of trees, and the animals that make up the wooded environment. Students become connected not only to the Trail, but also to the importance of the community of the Trail. They develop an understanding of the value of public land—that it not only needs to be taken care of, but also needs to be protected. Already, the project has made students and teachers far more aware of the history, culture, and ecology of their regional backyard, and more knowledgeable about the A.T. communities and resources. One overarching goal is that through the practice of art, observation, and hiking, students will start to connect with the importance of the space and that forming these habits will in turn cultivate the stewards needed for a healthy and sustainable future for the A.T.

Academically speaking, the visual arts teaching team of DeMark and Grove effectively addressed ten of Virginia’s Standards of Learning, and their innovative curriculum and pedagogy aligned seamlessly with several Common Core State Standards. In addition, the creation of the artist trading cards, and the use of the sketchbooks, encourages ongoing student reflections about the Appalachian Trail, its history, built and natural environments, and unique culture(s). The art show of larger, more finished pieces of work displayed at Bears Den is intended to bring people together, tying Woodgrove students with the local culture(s) and people of the Trail. Having parents, caregivers and students take part in the opening gave the community a better understanding of the space at Bears Den, and the importance of this place in relation to the Appalachian Trail.

In the future, Geoff and Shawn plan to create more artist card distribution centers that could be sent out to other Trail centers from Georgia to Maine. They also hope to adopt a trail to encourage students to take ownership of maintaining a part of the A.T. and to develop in them a sense of stewardship and pride. For them, art is the perfect foundation for creating a triangle of connections between Bears Den Trail Center, A.T. thru-hikers, and the students of Woodgrove High School. This PBSL experience is helping to clarify more challenging theoretical concepts for their students as it allows in-depth exploration of the place where they live, while also being consistent with the contemporary movement of site-specific temporary art.

