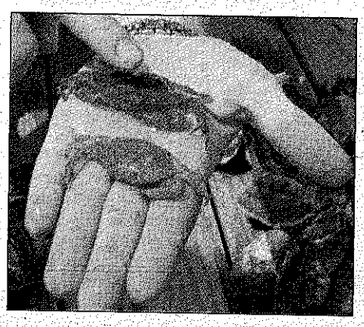
The Washington Post



PHOTOS BY SUSAN BIDDLE — THE WASHINGTON POST

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation's Student Leadership Program allows teens to learn about oysters and other bay critters. Rep. John Sarbanes has proposed a bill to provide funds for environmental education. From left, Eric Hartge of the foundation; Bennett Tison, 15, of Arnold; Kristen Crewe, 15, of Kent Island; Sarbanes; and Julian Bergstrom-Wood, 13, of Great Falls.

Giving Children An Outdoor Education

Sarbanes Proposes Environmental Grants

By Raymond McCaffrey
Washington Post Staff Writer

The teenagers stood on an Annapolis area beach inspecting the shellfish they had taken from the Chesapeake Bay, seemingly unaware that they were serving as poster children for proposed federal legislation designed to improve environmental education.

"We're just looking at them and learning from them," said Julia Baugh, a 17-year-old Annapolis High School graduate who peered into a container of specimens.

Baugh and the other teens were participating in the Chesapeake Bay Foundation's student leadership program, and their activity was exactly what Rep. John Sarbanes (D-Md.) had in mind when he announced the No Child Left Inside bill on Monday.

The measure (HR 3036) would amend the federal No Child Left Behind Act in ways that would free up funding for environmental education. The five-year-old landmark education initiative of the Bush administration mandates annual testing in reading and math and has been criticized by some for prompting school officials to give less emphasis to other subjects.

Sarbanes's bill is designed to serve a multitude of purposes, including getting kids outdoors to creating more environmentally conscious citizens.

"People want to save the Chesapeake Bay. That's what draws us to the water's edge here," said Sarbanes, who made the announcement at the bay foundation's Annapolis headquarters, not far from the beachfront where the teens collected the shellfish.

Sarbanes was joined by representatives from the foundation and the National Wildlife Federation. "We're going to be able to educate our citizens," said Don Baugh, the foundation's vice president of education.

Proponents also say the bill would help kids experience life away from a video screen. The program would offer middle and high school students the chance to learn about the bay's watershed and how to improve water quality in their own communities.

"It's a really cool opportunity to learn about the influences every person has on the environment and see the importance my actions have," said Baugh's daughter, Julia, who stood on the beach with other participants in the foundation's student leadership program.

Sarbanes told the crowd about his concern for his youngest son — the only one of his three children who is not an outdoor enthusiast, he said.

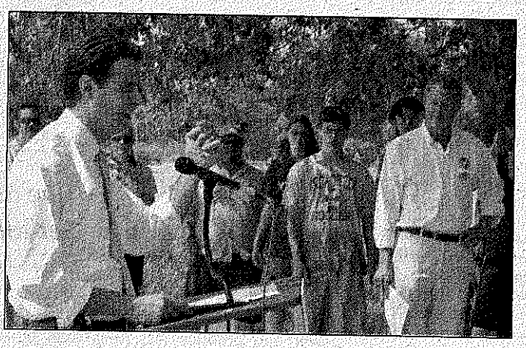
"I do see the amount of time, quite frankly, that he spends receiving these electronic impulses," he said.

Sarbanes said getting children outside was a key motivation for the bill. "If we get our kids out into nature, it's good for them," he said.

Proponents of the bill hope that the education will be more structured than just letting kids play outside, however. Sarbanes talked about the need to develop an "environmental literacy plan." The bill would create a grant program that would allow states to develop environmental education in schools, he said.

The bill also calls for grants that could be used to help train environmental teachers who would also serve as mentors to students.

"Someone must teach them how to lead and lead intelligently," said Larry Wiseman, president of the American Forest Foundation.



At left, Sarbanes unveils his environmental education bill before a friendly crowd: environmentalists, students and Will Baker, president of the bay foundation. Above left, in a leadership program outing, Eric Hartge, a foundation staff member, and Bennett Tison examine shells dredged from the Tolly Point reef.