



Envirothon competitions include hands-on field exams, such as identifying soil horizons.

# Opening the door to lifelong opportunities

## ENVIROTHON PROGRAM TEACHES CONSERVATION THROUGH COMPETITION.

*Kayla Zacharias / Photos by WI Land + Water*

Middle school and high school students around the state are currently preparing for Wisconsin's ultimate environmental science challenge: Envirothon. It's a day of exams, field challenges and team presentations that showcase the kids' knowledge of environmental science. Envirothon is an opportunity for students to collectively learn about natural resource management and practice their problem-solving skills.

Students spend months preparing for the exams they'll take in forestry, soils and land use, aquatic ecology and wildlife. To keep them on their toes, county conservationists, natural resource professionals and professors work together to create a new test each year. They make the tests as hands-on as possible, weaving fieldwork into the questions. For example, the soils and land use exam could involve identifying soil horizons. Students might have to match trees with their leaves in the forestry exam. All of the exams take place outdoors, unless items used for them could be damaged by the elements. Teams prepare for the tests in unique ways — teachers work the material into their classes, clubs meet after school or advisors find new ways to teach their teams.

"We brought in speakers and professionals who worked with us to develop hands-on technique and understand the material," said Jenelle Wempner, a participant of the 2015 and 2016 Wisconsin Envirothon from Middleton High School. "We'd work out in the field when the weather was nice, identifying species or taking soil samples and analyzing them for texture and composition."

Wempner's high school offered advanced placement environmental science, but most of the material was self-taught. She believes that helped them most at the competition, which Middleton has won the last two years.

While students have plenty of time to prepare for the exams, team presentations are another story. The presentations are based on a hypothetical scenario, prompting students to find a solution for a specific problem surrounding the current issue — this year, agricultural soils and water conservation stewardship. The scenario is posted just a few weeks before Envirothon, giving students limited time to put together their presentations. Despite all the hard work that goes into participating, students find the experience extremely rewarding.

"Material aside, I enjoyed the company of the people," said Wempner. "Envirothon exposes you to like-minded students from across the state, and in our case, the country. Being able to make those connections and meet so many great people was an amazing experience."

Until recently, every team that registered for Envirothon was allowed to participate because relatively few teams were doing so. Now, the youth education committee recommends that advisors sign up as soon as registration opens, because



Weather permitting, teams from across Wisconsin spend months preparing for field exams, then must prepare team presentations based on a hypothetical scenario, like agricultural soils and water conservation.



Envirothon teaches teamwork, problem solving and environmental awareness, and paves the way for future opportunities.

they've had to put a cap on how many teams can participate in the last few years. There aren't qualifying events, so teams are given spots on a first-come, first-served basis.

Kim Warkentin, youth education director for Wisconsin Land + Water, said presenting to agriculture educators and Future Farmers of America (FFA) has helped get more schools involved. Envirothon's youth education committee also works with individual counties and the Department of Public Instruction to promote the event. County conservationists sometimes present to schools or even train teams themselves, said Kim.

Collaboration between students, educators, volunteers, conservation professionals and Envirothon's youth education committee makes the event possible. Without them, students across Wisconsin would miss out on an experience that increases their environmental awareness and paves the way for opportunities in the future.

"Most of my teammates and I are studying natural sciences. If nothing else, the respect for our environment instilled in us through the competition is some-

thing that won't leave us, even as we grow and move on to different things," said Wempner, who now studies geology and chemistry at UW-Madison. "It helped me land an internship with the U.S. Forest Service in Ketchikan, Alaska.

I was able to apply a lot of the techniques I'd learned through Envirothon and I don't think I would have gotten that amazing opportunity without my background from the competition."

Students will open the doors to opportunities far and wide at this year's Envirothon on April 7 at Wisconsin Lion's Camp in Rosholt. The team with the highest overall score will go on to participate in the week-long North American Envirothon in Emmitsburg, Maryland, where they will compete for recognition, scholarships and prizes.

For more information, parents and teachers can view the 2017 brochure and program guidelines by finding Wisconsin Land + Water on Facebook or visiting [wisconsinlandwater.org/events/envirothon](http://wisconsinlandwater.org/events/envirothon). 

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Teams from Middleton High School won the statewide competition in 2015 and 2016. This year's competition is April 7 in Rosholt. Winners will go on to the North American Envirothon in Emmitsburg, Maryland.