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Date: Friday, January 12, 2007

### Young Scientists to Study Mercury Pollution



Written by Tom Walsh

Thursday, January 11, 2007

WINTER HARBOR — Students from the Maine School of Science and Mathematics (MSSM) are spending 10 days on the campus of Acadia National Park's Schoodic Education and Research Center (SERC).

By A dozen students arrived at SERC on Monday to participate in a field class that is introducing them to environmental research at Acadia National Park and engaging them in ongoing research activities at the park.

Located in Limestone, MSSM is a state-funded magnet school that provides strong preparation in science and math to the 150 high school students from throughout Maine who live at the school.

The field course is being offered by Acadia Partners for Science and Learning in partnership with Acadia National Park and the Senator George J. Mitchell Center for Environmental and Watershed Research at the University of Maine in Orono.

"The broad learning objectives for the course, as for other educational programs at the Schoodic Center, is to introduce students to scientific issues related to the study of natural systems, with a particular focus on perceiving and understanding change within complex systems," said Bill Zoellick, Acadia Partners' director of business development.

"In this particular course, we will introduce students to systems, using watersheds as the primary unit of spatial scale, scaling down to a particular collection site and scaling up to a regional perspective."

Through Jan. 18, students will be studying watersheds that have different fire histories, Zoellick said.

"They will learn how paleo-ecological studies can trace the history of an area back for hundreds of years," he said. "The particular research questions that will be the focus of the course relate to mercury deposition in the watersheds."

The primary instructor for the class is Sarah J. Nelson, a Canon National Parks Science Scholar currently working at the Senator George J. Mitchell Center for Environmental and Watershed Research at UM-O.

Nelson has spent the last eight years studying mercury pollution within Acadia National Park. A potent neurotoxin that accumulates in wildlife and humans, mercury has been found at

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elevated levels in birds, fish and amphibians within the park.

Nelson is among a team of scientists who have been constructing a “mercury budget” to better understand the source of the mercury, how it is stored and how it moves into the watershed, where it affects plants and animals.

“A key to identifying hotspots of mercury bio-accumulation may be an evaluation of landscape factors that lead to enhanced mercury storage, transformations or transport,” Nelson said in her description of the upcoming field course.

“This field class will contribute to this ongoing research program by describing how mercury changes in each ecosystem component — soil and the litter of leaves and needles that fall in the autumn — as it is exposed to simulated snowmelt.”

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