

Community

GIS, shipwrecks and a pirate: School kids learn about navigation at OSU

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About 480 middle- and high-school students from Corvallis, Beaverton and Portland visited Oregon State University Thursday to celebrate international "GIS Day."

They toured campus with global positioning system devices, listened to state climatologist George Taylor discuss weather prediction and pored over maps.

The biggest surprise came, however, when Dawn Wright, OSU geosciences professor and organizer of the event, appeared as her alter ego, Pirate Deepsea Dawn.

"A pirate, arrr," the students yelled, bursting into wild applause.

Wright runs a lab on campus called Davey Jones' Locker, focused on sea-floor mapping and marine and coastal geographic information systems.

"Davey Jones' Locker really stands for the bottom of the ocean, and in our lab we map the bottom of the ocean with GIS," she said.

Davey Jones also is a villain in the recent movie "Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest," and proved to be a popular character with Thursday's crowd.

GIS is a method of creating and managing spatial data and associated attributes. It can be used for everything from cartography to land-use planning to habitat conservation.

GPS, which falls under the scope of GIS, uses satellites to determine precise locations and time references.

Wright and her team used data collected from submarines and research vessels to create an online map detailing their trips to American Samoa.

While at Pago Pago Harbor, they even discovered a shipwreck. It is believed to be the U.S.S. Chehalis, a 311-foot U.S. Navy gasoline tanker ship that sank following a gasoline explosion in 1949; nine people died when it went down.

Their Web site also includes links to video footage recorded up to 1,000 feet underwater, and gives close looks at starfish and stingrays.

In addition to underwater applications, the students learned about ways GIS is being used locally.

Theresa Valentine, a scientist and computer analyst in the College of Forestry, used GIS to zoom in on Cheldelin Middle School on a map projected in the LaSells Stewart Center auditorium.



CASEY CAMPBELL/Gazette-Times
Emmanuel Sanchez holds the map while Nate Cook looks over his shoulder as the group of Cheldelin Middle School sixth-graders prepare to go on a Global Positioning System walk around the Oregon State University campus on Thursday. The GPS walk was part of GIS day at OSU, providing an opportunity for students from several different schools to learn about global information systems.

"It's not just a pretty map. It also contains data," Valentine said.

Using Benton County's Web site, Valentine was able to get information on the tax lots near the school. The map includes information about who owns which lot, its assessed and market values and the owner's address.

"You might be surprised at all the information that's available," said Valentine, noting that these types of maps are useful to city planners and Realtors. The schools also can use them to set boundaries and route buses.

Valentine then zeroed in on Crescent Valley High School. She identified the nearby Jackson-Frazier Wetlands, as well as some 100- and 500-year floodplains.

A creek running through the school's campus forms a 100-year floodplain, so that could be a problem every century or so, she said.

Valentine also showed the students a Web site where they can look at maps of the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest, and find out information about watersheds and climate stations there.

GIS Day is celebrated at more than 2,000 schools and organizations in 90 countries, and has become a tradition at OSU.

Last year, 11-year-old Anna Mai's sister participated. This time it was Anna's turn.

"It was fun," said Anna, a seventh-grader at Pilgrim Lutheran School in Beaverton.

Her classmate, 12-year-old Amanda Walworth, also enjoyed the field trip.

"My dad has a GPS system, so I see him use it," she said.

ON THE NET: To learn more about OSU Professor Dawn "Deepsea" Wright's lab, Davey Jones' Locker, see <http://dusk.geo.orst.edu/djl/>.

An interactive map of the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest can be found at www.fsl.orst.edu/lter/.

More information about geographic information systems is available online at www.gis.com.

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