

Scientist helps kids—through turtles—connect with nature

November 22 2013

A natural with kids, Stephen Blake asks a group of teens to pretend to be foraging giant tortoises, ambulating on all fours at a tortoise's pace (about 0.2 mph) and searching for food in plastic cups laid out in roughly the vegetation patterns found on the Galapagos Islands.

A student from Cahokia, Ill., where Blake is leading an outreach activity, wants to know what sound a tortoise makes. A sort of bellow, Blake says, joking. So the kid trundles about nosing for food—and bellowing.

The official purpose of the foraging game is to teach [kids](#) about island biogeography—but the unofficial one is to teach them it is OK to make a complete fool of yourself in pursuit of knowledge.

Blake, a visiting scientist at Washington University in St. Louis, and his wife, Sharon Deem, director of the St. Louis Zoo Institute for Conservation Medicine, split their time between St. Louis and the Galapagos Islands.

Together or separately, Blake and Deem have traveled the world trying to protect [endangered species](#), including lowland gorillas, forest elephants, [giant tortoises](#), sea turtles, jaguars and maned wolves.

Lately, they've put increasing emphasis on trying to restore another endangered species: kids who care about nature. One of the ways they do this is to get kids to search for tagged box turtles both in Forest Park, in the city of St. Louis, and at the Tyson Research Center, WUSTL's

2,000-acre field station in the wooded suburbs.

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

Citation: Scientist helps kids—through turtles—connect with nature (2013, November 22)
retrieved 25 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2013-11-scientist-kidsthrough-turtlesconnect-nature.html>

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