

For park worker, love of job is only natural

By SHERRY WALLACE
Staff Writer

TRENTON — Wayne Henderek is a naturalist. He runs the Washington Crossing State Park Nature Center, a forested stretch of land in Hope-well Township.

On a regular basis, he hosts school children of all ages, family groups and anyone interested in exploring the natural wonders of the outdoors at the 800-acre park, where wildlife is allowed to be wild.

Inside the old but cozy wooden cabin that is the indoor meeting area of the Nature Center, there are many teaching aids, including a hive of bees making honey; many, many insects; a piece of bark chewed by a beaver; signs that say "please touch;" and more.

At the center learning about nature is fun because you get to hang out, outside.

Henderek, who has studied agricultural education and wildlife biology, is a teacher there.

"If we can stimulate and excite (students) so that there's a bounce in their step when they leave here, I feel I've done something," said Henderek.

"The object is to get a love of nature, to feel affection for nature."

For parents of young children, who often are looking for ways to give curious offspring stimulation and fun for a day in childhood, bringing them to the open spaces of the Nature Center is a great opportunity for mental and physical exer-



Wayne Henderek shows youngsters from the Jewish Community Center of Ewing some leaves, insects and logs at the Washington Crossing State Park Nature Center.

Staff photo by
Patti Miller

cise.

"Nowadays we do a lot of hands-on activities," said Henderek. "It used to be look and see."

VISITORS CAN actually help build a wigwam, the kind that Native Americans lived in. They learn the concept of the design, using bark for walls, animal skin for warmth and turtle shell for aesthetics. The experience can be appreciat-

ed more fully by crawling inside to sit on the bare ground floor.

"You come too," squealed a small thrill seeker on a recent visit to the center. Fearful of entering the land of make believe by himself, he tried to persuade his mother to accompany him — to no avail. Mom was not about to bend low enough to get through the door of the house.

The programs are geared for primary school-age children, but par-

CAPITOL PROFILE

Wayne Henderek

POSITION: Park Naturalist, Washington Crossing State Park, Department of Environmental Protection and Energy

EDUCATION: Master's degree, agricultural education, Rutgers; bachelor's degree, wildlife biology, Rutgers

AGE: 38

FAMILY: Wife, Barbara; children, Samara, Jay, Martin, Robyn

RESIDENCE: Titusville

ents do bring small children along for the experience, and Henderek, who seems to have the patience of a saint, also has an infinite repertoire of activities — which is understandable considering that the subject is the great outdoors.

As park naturalist, Henderek has developed an environmental education curriculum using some 30 hands-on activities, to the delight of thousands of visitors of all ages each

year.

He is solely responsible for the production of the Washington State Park Nature Center newsletter, which is published four times a year and includes nature articles, information about the park and a schedule of public programs.

AN ADVENTURE activity like the rope bridge draws participants ranging in age from fourth-grader through adult. They learn basic knot tying and rope riggings that have been used in the wilderness for generations.

An environmental treasure hunt sends students roaming through the park in the style of a traditional scavenger hunt, either searching for natural objects or creating what they cannot find.

Since coming to the park in 1986, Henderek has written, designed and constructed many of the informative natural-resource exhibits. Titles include the Geology of New Jersey, Rocks in the Making and Wildlife Fact from Fiction.

Henderek said he's always had a love for nature and knew that he would make the natural environment a life study. That study is carrying over to his family life. Henderek and his wife, Barbara, have decided to teach their children at home, at least while the children are young.