

Your World

News and commentary from the Lower Hudson and beyond

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Hudson River always on menu at Yonkers center

Jennifer Mokos likes the idea of liquid lunches.

Not the ones with a couple of martinis — but rather those where water is the main course.

Mokos is an educator at the Beczak Environmental Education Center in Yonkers and spends one lunch hour a month telling the story of the Hudson River to anyone who wants to learn.

"Lunchtime Learning" at Beczak is new for the center, which routinely hosts 300 groups a year, mostly school kids happy to move their classrooms to a new venue.

A recent version of this work-day diversion for adult students shows that

the gathering isn't your typical slide show and brown bag.

Mokos' centerpiece is a five-by-two-foot box — more like the bottom drawer of a big bureau — that houses a 3-D version of the river basin from the Atlantic Ocean to the Newburgh-Beacon Bridge.

It's a distance of roughly 60 miles and the box's entire contents have been built to scale, except that the long wall of the Palisades is a little shorter in real life.

Using a table that can be jacked up and down on either end, Mokos replicates the Hudson's four daily tides as they move nine miles north then eight miles south, bringing salt water up and fresh water down, the natural washing-machine activity that helps keep the habitat clean. It takes 126 days for the river's water to make it all the way from one end to the other.

Mokos uses a beaker of chalky water — non-dairy creamer shows up bet-

ter than salt — to show how far ocean water can travel north and what happens as it mixes with fresh water.

"It's this incredibly dynamic environment," Mokos said of the Hudson. "So the organisms have to be able to adapt to it."

That's not all the habitat has to handle.

Using a sponge as a wetland and ice tea mix as pollution, Mokos talks a volunteer into pouring pretend chemicals all over the Croton River and onto the river's west side.

Pepper plays the part of litter and by the time Mokos brings "rain" from a

spray bottle, the trials that the river and its tributaries must overcome to stay healthy become graphically clear.

The wetlands sponge does its part, but it's apparent from the relative amounts of pollution and wetlands that it won't be adequate. Additionally, with pollution increasing and wetlands decreasing, the equation is getting harder to balance.

One of the biggest problems is dirt — increased sedimentation from overdevelopment that is hurting the river's vibrancy by trapping light and cutting down on photosynthesis that is nature's linchpin of the Hudson's health.

Mokos admits that her somewhat simplistic presentation is geared to younger audiences, who seem to come away from their visits a little more knowledgeable about the river, even when they learn inside the center rather than on the river.

"This really brings home the concept of how the river's tides work," Mokos said, cleaning up her teaching aid. "The kids seem

to like it. I don't know how many times I have to tell them to stand back from the display. They're very eager."

Terry Cohen is a program coordinator for Riverside Park Fund, which works to educate students in New York City about the river off the banks of Upper Manhattan.

She comes to the center whenever possible, as she did for the lunch gathering, to steal ideas.

"We have trouble getting kids to understand the river because we don't have a good natural shoreline to work with," Cohen said, noting that she sends teachers up to Beczak because her organization doesn't have its own center. "What these guys are doing is fabulous."

The center's next session, on the river's food chain, is at noon March 16. Bring your own lunch.

For more information about the center, visit www.beczak.org/membership.htm.

Earth Watch appears each Friday. Send your ideas or comments to Greg Clary at gclary@lohud.com or 914-696-8566.