

INLAND SEAS

Taking education out of the classroom and onto the water

BY ANDY TAYLOR-FABE
Record-Eagle staff writer

Learning about the ecology and history of the Great Lakes doesn't have to be limited to a classroom and textbooks.

The Inland Seas Education Association has been giving classes for people of all ages that offer the real thing — the lake — from the vantage point of its schooner, Inland Seas, since 1994. Topics range from maritime history to astronomy to the study of invasive species in Lake Michigan.

"During the summer, the classes are a real mixed bag," said Tom Skinner, Inland Seas assistant director.

Although some of the courses are aimed at particular age groups, the Family Schoolship sessions offer entire families a chance to study the science of Lake Michigan and the basic principles of sailing.

"(The schoolship cruises) are taught in a loose way to appeal to a multi-generational crowd," Skinner said.

During the trips, students collect plankton, study water samples, examine samples of the lake bottom and trawl for fish.

In addition, the instructors and the crew offer basic instruction in the physics of sailing, allowing students a chance to steer the boat and learn about navigation.

Tom Kelly, captain of the Inland Seas and one of the association's founders, said he especially enjoys sharing sailing-related instruction.

"It's fun to be able to teach without people realizing that they're learning," he said.

Complete lack of science knowledge is not a problem

for those with an interest in Inland Seas programs. Skinner said that few who attend have experience, and none of the classes are meant for advanced students with extensive knowledge of ecology or sailing.

The real purpose of the program, Skinner said, is to "introduce the Great Lakes to people in a hands-on fashion" and to make people "sensitive to the needs of the Great Lakes."

The floating classroom, Inland Seas, is only 9 years old. It replicates a type of schooner that would have been, as Skinner said, one of "the trucks of the Great Lakes" in the 1800s.

The 77-foot, \$750,000 vessel has a modern engine, but the rigging and sailing gear are exactly what would appear on a schooner of that era. Due to the size of the boat, capacity for individual classes is limited

to 25 people per trip.

However, Skinner said the construction of an Education Center in Suttons Bay will make up for any enrollment limitations.

Inland Seas is a non-profit organization relying heavily on grants and donations. Therefore, Skinner said, funds for projects like the Center are not always available.

The organization relies heavily on fees, too, usually taking in \$30-45 per person for its classes. But Skinner said donations from its 600 members are Inland Seas' "core of support."

Stretching a \$500,000 budget as thin as it will go, Inland Seas also relies on a staff of volunteer instructors who undergo intensive training in the spring, as well as a professional staff.

"We want to make sure we have the highest quality programs available," Kelly said.



Record-Eagle/Meegan M. Reid

The "Jib" group checks the clarity of the water while sailing on the Inland Seas on Suttons Bay.



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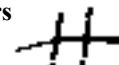
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