

# Summer Field School – Waterways

By Kimberly Hagen

Something funny happened to a small group of U-32 and Montpelier High School students on their way to vacation this past summer. They got up early and went to school! What were they thinking? What could have inspired them?

These students attended the **Waterways Summer Field School** at U-32, and things were a little different than what they had experienced before in school. In this class, students mucked around in wetlands, waded in streams, splashed in waterfalls, canoed down the Winooski River, (and dumped a few times), swam in the middle of Lake Champlain, cruised on the University of Vermont's research vessel Melosira, and followed whales in the St. Lawrence Seaway. They collected dragonflies, butterflies and leaf hoppers, caught frogs, salamanders and leeches. They learned to test the levels of nitrogen, phosphorous, turbidity, and pH, and what those tests meant and the impacts on humans. They walked on the ledges and rock of an ancient time, and examined a whale skeleton found in the Champlain shoreline. They wrote pages of observations, painted what they saw, and put together fantastic projects. At the end they were awarded a science credit.

Somewhere between the first weeks' uncertainty of what they were getting into, and the undeniable certainty of the end during the long sleepy drive home from Canada, came the realization that they had really truly enjoyed themselves, and they had learned more than they expected. Perhaps even more importantly, they had taken it upon themselves to find out the things they wanted to know.

"I really liked that we got to go out and do everything ourselves," explained Sarah Campbell recently. "I learned a lot more than I expected, and I would certainly do it again."

Funded by Community Connections, the Summer Field School was an exploratory venture with several goals. The Federal grant which is to be used for keeping students off the streets and occupied with enriching and positive experiences when school is not in session, also requires that the community uses its local resources and



*Summer Field school students build a model in the U-32 science lab.*

talents. Community Connections took this goal another step by creating a full-fledged five-week summer class open to 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students from both high schools. Students who completed this free class earned a full science credit. (An Archeology class was held simultaneously at Montpelier High School, also open to students from either school.)

Students attended the class for a variety of reasons. Some students were looking for something to do for the summer, some wished to lighten up their class load during the regular school year, and some were in need of academic reinforcement. Because the class was small, students received a great deal of individualized attention.

Using water as a focus for summer school class is a natural, and the Winooski Watershed provided the

perfect local venue. Students began their explorations at the source of the Winooski River in the wetlands of Cabot, Vermont. From there they continued following the flow of brooks and streams down to the Winooski itself, on to Lake Champlain, and ultimately the St. Lawrence Seaway and the Atlantic Ocean. In many ways it was like the old-fashioned way of learning, i.e. the students learned about water, by being out in it and on it, by observing, and listening to it. For some, it complements other methods of learning, for others, it is the best way to learn. ❖



*Community Connections Summer Field School students prepare to explore the Winooski River.*