



Dick Hilmer gives a kayak lesson to a group of girl scouts from Pennsylvania.

By Matthew Belson
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Eastham -

At the landing at the end of Hemenway Road, Dick Hilmer readied six tandem sea kayaks in anticipation for a group of Girl Scouts to take on a waterborne tour of Nauset Marsh Tuesday morning.

The eight girls ranging from age 13 to 14 and their two leaders from Cadet Troop 32 from Allentown, Pa., arrived resplendent in tie-dyed T-shirts and bursting with enthusiasm about a chance to paddle.

Troop leader Eileen Sleva said this was the first time the Scouts would go paddling and is part of an interesting project called shore-to-sea where Girl Scouts learn about ecology and environmental science.

Hilmer gathered the Scouts in a circle and handed out life jackets for them to put on.

"You want to be safe," he said.

After a short demonstration of how to hold and use a paddle, Hilmer talked about the ecology of the marsh and the forces of wind and currents that will be encountered out on the water.

"The kayaking is the fun part to get you out there to interact with Nauset Marsh," he said.

After the instruction, the Scouts climbed into the kayaks and headed down the channel under the supervision of Hilmer. Not surprisingly, it took a few minutes of boats banging into each other before the Scouts got the hang of paddling together.

Hilmer talked about how the wind blows over the marsh, how to find sheltered areas along the banks lined with grass. A great egret flew overhead followed by an osprey.

Hilmer runs the company Explore Cape Cod and said he takes about 3,000 people a year out on kayak tours.

"Cape Cod is the perfect place," said Hilmer. "To me, this is an outdoor classroom."

Surprisingly, of the students Hilmer takes out on kayaking tours, the groups from off Cape tended to be the most appreciative of being on the water and learning about the ecology of the Cape.

He thinks kids growing up on the Cape may take the surrounding beauty for granted. Hilmer thinks, however, this is slowly changing and works closely with Nauset Regional Middle School to introduce students to kayaking and experiencing the outdoors.

After almost an hour of paddling, Hilmer directed the group to a sand bar at the mouth of the inlet. The Atlantic Ocean is visible. The Scouts got out of their boats and to explore the marsh.

Hilmer called them over to show them different kinds of seaweed such as mermaid's hair and rockweed. He laid out a bright green plant called sea lettuce and explained how it tends to show up in marsh systems where there is nitrogen pollution coming from septic systems, fertilizer and storm water runoff.

After a quick snack the Scouts piled into the kayaks for the return trip. The group paused to watch a lobsterman haul in his pots.

They were getting tired as the wind picked up, but back at the landing the smiles were visible on their faces.

When asked what they liked most about the trip, their responses ranged from the kayaking to seeing the osprey. The troop thanked Hilmer and set off to the youth hostel where they were staying.

The next day the Scouts planned to go on a whale-watching trip in Provincetown.

After the Scouts left, Hilmer pulled the kayaks together and organized the gear and waited to do it all over again with a second troop scheduled for a kayak trip in the afternoon.

Explore Cape Cod, 508-240-1211