

Discovery museum's new project to educate children about water

By Garren Shipley
Daily Staff Writer

WINCHESTER — Sometimes serious science requires making a mess with chocolate and Kool-Aid.

The Shenandoah Valley Discovery Museum's new program to teach children about water in the world around them got its public debut Saturday afternoon at the museum on the Loudoun Street mall.

Technically, the model is a small watershed, designed to show children the interaction of

rain and runoff with other things in the environment.

So what exactly is a watershed? The textbook definition is a self-contained area of drainage specific to one stream, river or other body of water.

But it's easier to think about it — and the Enviroscape model — in terms of drops of water. If a drop of water hits the ground, where does it go? And what does it do while it's going there?

Donated by the Winchester-Clarke Garden Club, the model represents a town on a river next to a bay or ocean. The

demonstration starts when youths place tiny houses, factories, animals and cars onto the landscape.

The instructor then shows what happens when pollution — in the form of drink mixes, cocoa powder and other kid-friendly colored substances — from fires, industrial accidents, farm runoff and even everyday living interact with rain.

Of course, the children's rain-dance helps to speed things along. At the end of the presentation, it's easy to see that the

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Mary Bruce Glaize, left, with outstretched arm, demonstrates the new Enviroscape model to a group of children at the Shenandoah Valley Discovery Museum in Winchester on Friday.

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water an area uses every day eventually ends up in one place.

"All that gunk winds up in one [body of water]," said Mary Bruce Glaize, an outreach instructor with the museum, spraying the model with water.

The youths keep clapping, snapping and stomping, and the water keeps on coming. Meanwhile, the river starts to fill up with cherry-flavored industrial runoff.

Locally and for most of the Old Dominion, that's the Chesapeake Bay. On the model, it's a small ocean that smells a lot like chocolate-covered cherries.

"The water sheds from one place to the next, to the next, to the next, and goes down in that river," she said.

Virginia schools teach about the interconnectedness of the commonwealth's waters, but sometimes a hands-on demonstration like the model helps bring the abstract concept home.

Today's students will likely be living with the day-to-day impact of watershed science for years to come.

Virginia and other states are working with the federal government to clean up the Chesapeake. And that means new rules and regulations as far inland as the Shenandoah Valley.

"It relates concretely to things in their environment," said Jan Kirby, the museum's director of education programs.

At present, the model goes to area elementary schools where fourth- and fifth-grade teachers ask for some extra help in teaching the concept.

Once the museum moves to its new home in Jim Barnett Park, the exhibit will get an almost permanent home.

"It won't be an exhibit out on the floor, but it will be on demand program, like a lot of our others," she said.

► Contact Garren Shipley at gshipley@nvdaily.com