Science and Youth -- April 21, 2012

Once a year, I visit the 3rd grade classes at Twin Valley Community Schools in West Alexandria, Ohio. I do this to share my interest in fossils. I talk about fossils and show specimens. It never ceases to amaze me just how enthused (and knowledgeable!) these youngsters are.

I often hear of the challenge of getting kids interested in science, but it seems to me that the real challenge is keeping them interested. Kids have an innate desire for “finding things out” that makes them perfectly suited for science education. It’s just that something happens along the way to make them lose that sense of wonder.

I’ve been reflecting on what I’ve seen and heard during my talks with the 3rd graders. Here’s what I’ve noticed:

- Kids love to share their own experiences. If they’ve had personal experiences that are in any way related to the subject at hand, it greatly increases their engagement in that subject.
- Telling a child that something “just is”, without explanation, is very dissatisfying for them.
- What may seem like a silly or nonsensical question on the surface can actually reveal deep insight and a refreshingly unique perspective.
- Once a child’s interest is piqued, they want to follow a subject to its logical conclusion. For example, if a child is interested in the fact that bones can turn into fossils, they want to know: Can other things turn into fossils? Can humans turn into fossils?
- A “hands-on” experience is much more effective than just hearing something described.
- Kids love “record breaker” factoids: biggest, fastest, oldest, etc.

Tapping into these motivators could make a real difference in keeping science viable in a child’s mind. The real trick is adjusting your approach as the motivators change.

paleontology