Geography seeds kids’ know-how

By JAMIE KRONBORG

ENCOURAGE 200 kids to use water-spray bottles to create ‘rain’ so that cocoa powder turns to ‘mud’ and none will baulk at the opportunity.

That’s what happened when grade five students from seven North East schools converged last week on Wangaratta’s Park Lane Nursery to dirty their hands on Wangaratta Student Environment Day.

Children from Wooragee Primary School joined with students from Wangaratta’s Special School and St Patrick’s Chiltern, St Mary’s Rutherglen, Whitfield Primary and Broken Creek Primary plunged their arms into waste water, dug holes and planted shrubs, eyed water bugs, discovered habitat and learned first-hand about Aboriginal food tools fashioned from stone and wood.

The event was organised by the acronymically-apt SEED – the School Environment Education Directory for the North East.

SEED provides teachers with ideas, information and methods to build children’s understanding of landscape, ecology and their place in the wider natural world.

Wangaratta Rural City, Park Lane Nursery, North East Water, Landcare, Wangaratta Sustainability Network, Cleanaway, State Emergency Service, North East Catchment Management Authority and NeWaste helped to organise demonstrations and run workshops for the students.

At the presentation on stormwater, its management and potentially destructive power, Waterwatch facilitator Emma Nilsson quizzes her group of kids about their understanding of water catchments.

She used a topographical model similar to the Bright-Myrtleford-Wangaratta region watershed completely with eucalypt forest, plantation timber – removable with the pluck of Emma’s hand, creeks running into the ‘Ovens River’ and the river flowing through farms and into a town.

Benalla’s Broken Creek Primary student Rory Power was keen to create rain in the upper reaches of the catchment, using a waterspray bottle – the next best thing to a water pistol when you’re not allowed to use one.

But Emma really caught the kids’ attention when she told her group that the mud that Rory caused to flow downhill towards the river was made with chocolate powder.

Answers came thick and fast about pollutants that could be found in water – ‘beer bottles’, ‘chip packets’, ‘Macca’s bags’ and ‘sewage’ – and then she pressed the children on unseen pollutants.

“Chemicals”, came the answer from farmer boy Rory and, from another, “Dirty dirt”.

Emma probed deeper: “How can farming affect water?” she asked.

The kids looked at the plastic black-and-white Holstein Friesian dairy cows glued to a look-alike paddock.

“Who’s from a farm?” Emma asked. Six or seven hands shot up.

These kids knew exactly what would end up in the stormwater from the cows.