



# 'Touching grass': Envirothon gets teenagers outside for hands-on ecology lesson

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*Julian Abraham / LehighValleyNews.Com*

Students from Pen Argyl High School digging in the soil at the "Soil and Land Use" station of Envirothon.



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EASTON, Pa.— In a tech-immersed culture where kids as young as **ten years old** are getting their first smartphones, Northampton County's "Envirothon" serves as a celebration of the opposite: kids learning by digging in the dirt.

The annual event took place Thursday on a foggy day, in Louise W. Moore Park in Easton. It has a bunch of sponsors, small construction companies in the area, science education groups, and even Wegman's Grocery, which supplied the donuts for the day.

The "Envirothon" is organized by the Northampton County Conservation District.

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*If you raise kids in the natural world, they're gonna grow up caring about the natural world. And we need this care about the natural world because it sustains us. It supports us. We depend on it. It's increasingly important."*

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**Morning Edition**

Jeff Mucklin, Outreach Coordinator at Nurture Nature Center

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The way it works: students in 12 teams from seven schools in the area study-up on a laundry list of ecological topics beforehand. Then, in immersive setting – involving the actual dirt, trees, and soil they're learning about – they compete in timed quizzes and tests. Thanks to the sponsors, they have a bunch of \$100 and \$75 Amazon gift cards to hand out to the kids as prizes – which organizers say is an effective incentive for the students, who are between 14-18 years old.



*Julian Abraham / LehighValleyNews.Com*

Students from Penn Argyl High digging a hole in the ground for the Soils and Land Use station.

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The full list of schools competing: Bangor Area High School, Freedom High School, Nazareth Area High School, Northampton Area High School, Pen Argyl Area High School, Moravian Academy Upper School, and Saucon Valley High School.

## 'Touching grass'

[Jeff Mucklin](#), an outreach coordinator at the [Nurture Nature Centre](#) in Easton, was the "entertainment" for the day.



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He had a cartoonishly elaborate laboratory of various scientific gizmos laid out on a table, which he was preparing for a demonstration in front of the students when the competition wrapped up.



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Jeff Mucklin, an Outreach Coordinator at the Nurture Nature Center, displays a picnic table full of science gadgets.

He said he's passionate about events like Envirothon, because they get kids to interact directly with the natural world.

"You know, we live in a world where, where screens are very important, and [the students] access to information and entertainment, but nothing beats going out into the real world and, and 'touching grass' and feeling the natural environment around us. I think it makes us more connected with the natural world to be out and experiencing it."

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Jeff Mucklin holds one of tools for demonstrating thermal conductivity. When he holds the bottom, the liquid rises due to the heat of his hand.

He also expressed hope that it could nurture the next generation of people in his field.

"You know, if you raise kids in the natural world, they're gonna grow up caring about the natural world," Mucklin said. "And we need this care about the natural world because it sustains us. It supports us. We depend on it."