

January, 2020, marked the one year anniversary of the rollout of the Ward Burton Wildlife Foundation's (WBWF) Next Generation Outreach Program. This educational initiative greatly raised the bar regarding the organization's effort to teach Virginia students about the importance of appreciating, conserving, and properly utilizing our vital natural resources. It is intended to aid in their development of stewardship responsibilities. Ward Burton, former NASCAR driver and lifelong outdoorsman and conservationist, believes one of the primary elements required to sustain a healthy environment that provides clean air, pure water, food, shelter, and space, is exposing youth to the beauty and value of the great outdoors. To kick off this particular organizational outreach effort, the foundation purchased a truck and travel trailer, loaded it with education props, and began delivering the message to schools across the Commonwealth.

During 2019, nearly 20,000 students and teachers in 119 rural Virginia schools across 30 cities and counties received the Next Generation Outreach message. For 2020, the goal is similar, but the focus will be on urban schools and students who are less likely to have "experienced the natural world" in the same way as rural students. As stated by LaKesia Foster, principal of James Hurst Elementary School in Portsmouth, "this is as close as the majority of my students will ever get to experience the wildlife."

WBWF has a strong relationship with the Virginia Forestry Educational Foundation (VFEF) and fully supports their mission "to financially support state wide youth education promoting sustainable forests for the environmental, social, and economic benefits of all Virginians." Through a Patron-level grant, VFEF has become a major funder for Next Generation Outreach. Ken Morgan, VFEF Chairman and president of Morgan Lumber Company located in Charlotte County, along with Brad Fuller, VFEF board member and formerly (retired) of Huber Engineered Woods in Halifax County, presented a check for \$20,000 to WBWF. Accepting the check is Ward Burton accompanied by WBWF Educator Mike Roberts.

Mike Roberts commented, "while we exceeded our projected 2019 educational goals, perhaps the most positive aspect was the cards, notes, letters, e-mails, and phone calls received from educators and principals from those schools visited. Many comments referenced how amazed teachers were that we were able to hold student attention throughout the 90-minute sessions."

WBWF has conducted youth programs for many years, but Next Generation Outreach is designed to coordinate programs with school systems for the purpose of covering topics from Virginia's Standards of Learning and complementing pre-planned lessons, which will in turn, raise the WBWF's educational bar significantly.

There is no charge to schools to receive this outreach. Partners such as VFEF make this possible. For more information, please contact the WBWF office at 434-476-7038.