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UNH Forest Watch Program Awards Sanbornton Teacher With Annual Award

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February 19, 2008

DURHAM, N.H. - Robert Schongalla, a science teacher at the Sant Bani School in Sanbornton, was awarded the 2007 Gary N. Lauten Award for outstanding service and commitment to the University of New Hampshire's Forest Watch program at a ceremony held recently on the Durham campus. In addition to the Lauten plaque, Schongalla was presented with the handcrafted, wood-burned walking stick given annually to recipients of the award. Schongalla teaches 5th- and 6th-grade science and 9th-grade Earth science at the private, co-educational K-12 school. He has been involved in the Forest Watch program since its inception in 1992.

"I feel lucky to be at Sant Bani and lucky to be part of the Forest Watch program," Schongalla says. "It has brought a wonderful program to the school and it has certainly enriched my science teaching. It provides a great hands-on activity for students who can be outdoors and focus on the environment by collecting real data that UNH scientists use."

Forest Watch is a unique way of conducting science with the help of primary and secondary school students who collect and process data relating to air pollution damage in forest stands in New England. Over 350 schools have participated in the program, with some 50 to 100 actively engaged in monitoring white pines, a bio-indicator species for ground-level ozone (smog), in any given year.

Over the course of 16 years, Forest Watch has demonstrated that students can collect valuable data for ongoing scientific research and learn science and mathematics by doing research in their local area. Student data have clearly shown how responsive white pines are to year-to-year variations in ozone levels.

Lauten, a former Air Force lieutenant colonel who died in December 2001, served as the Forest Watch program coordinator from 1992-1999. In 2002, the educational outreach program began recognizing teachers who best exemplify Lauten's devotion to Forest Watch's long-term goals.

"This award recognizes Gary's commitment to making science accessible in the pre-college classroom. He loved the program and became its heart and soul," says Barry Rock, Forest Watch director and professor of natural resources and plant biology at UNH's Institute for the Study of Earth, Oceans, and Space (EOS) and the department of natural resources. Adds Rock, "Teachers love the program because it integrates biology with physics, math, Earth science, etcetera."

Schongalla, who began his Forest Watch teaching tenure under Lauten's watch, notes that having been a part of the program since its inception, he and his students have been able to track changes in their forest data going back to 1992, when Sant Bani was just one of seven schools participating in Forest Watch.

"The fact that Robert has been an active participant in Forest Watch for 16 years is testimony to his commitment to hands-on environmental education, as well as to the value that classroom teachers place on the program as a means of engaging their students in authentic science," says Rock.

This summer, at Rock's behest, Schongalla plans to take several of his students to the 2008 IEEE International Geoscience & Remote Sensing Symposium being held in Boston to present some of their Forest Watch findings to the international scientific community.

For more information on Forest Watch, go to <http://www.forestwatch.sr.unh.edu>.

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A photograph is available to download here:

http://www.eos.unh.edu/newsimage/robert_schongalla.jpg

Caption: Teacher Robert Schongalla of the Sant Bani School in Sanbornton, N.H., recipient of the 2007 Gary N. Lauten Award for outstanding service and commitment to the UNH Forest Watch program.

Credit: Kristi Donohue, UNH/EOS.

