North Point students help plant trees for future park

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STAFF PHOTO by Jamie Anfenson-Comeau

From left, North Point senior Sierra Early, freshman Ross Bonaguro and senior William Bolton lll plant trees a t the future Port Tobacco River Park Friday

Students from North Point High School's NOAA Ocean Guardians programs helped make Charles County a little greener last week, planting 835 trees near the Port Tobacco River.

The plantings are part of a larger project by the Conservancy for Charles County and the Port Tobacco River Conservancy. With help from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Charles County recently purchased 149 acres of former farmland along the headwaters of Port Tobacco River, said Lynne Wheeler, member of the board of directors for the Conservancy of Charles County.

The Conservancy of Charles County and Port Tobacco River Conservancy have scheduled public tree plantings through the month of April, with the intention of building a natural forest buffer area to help protect the river and create a habitat for wildlife in the creation of a new county park, Wheeler said. "We want to have an access road, to go down to the river, for kayaking launch, and for this to be a very low-impact recreation area, with walking paths," Wheeler said. "This specifically will be called the Port Tobacco River Park."

Wheeler said the groups are planting native trees, including willow oak, white oak, bald cypress, river birch and white pine trees.

Twenty-nine students from North Point's NOAA Ocean Guardian program turned out Friday morning to assist with planting trees.

The NOAA Ocean Guardian program was created by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, or NOAA, to recognize schools that have made a commitment to the protection and conservation of local watersheds, the world's ocean and special ocean areas, such as national marine sanctuaries, according to its website.

Schools do this by taking on projects and learning experiences related to conservation of watersheds and the world's oceans and by engaging in environmental and sustainable practices, according to the Ocean Guardian website. Eligible schools that meet their goals may apply for grants through the program.

"What we're trying to do is bring awareness to national marine sanctuaries," said Lolita Kiorpes, biology and environmental sciences teacher at North Point. "We teach the students about watershed health, and how in our own backyard, we can protect the health of the ocean by protecting watersheds, because the watershed feeds into the oceans."

Kiorpes said North Point is the first NOAA Ocean Guardian school in Maryland. "To be designated [an Ocean Guardian school] means that we are out there planting, doing, being aware, and learning to become good stewards of the earth," Kiorpes said. "It's also about creating partnerships within the community, so students know they're not the only ones doing this."

Kiorpes said North Point is currently working on obtaining its second of five banners offered to NOAA Ocean Guardian schools. "The students really get into it," Kiorpes said.

Leeadrian Tengco, 17, a senior and participant in the Ocean Guardian program, said he became involved in the NOAA Ocean Guardians program after taking biology with Kiorpes, and took part in tree plantings last year. He said he enjoys getting outside and doing things to help protect the environment. "For the generations that come after us, it's important to keep the earth alive, because, as we know, pollution and global warming are really affecting us," Tengco said. "Not just for ourselves, but for animals too, because we all benefit each other."

Kiorpes said trees perform a number of valuable services. "Trees help with keeping the water cycle, because the roots pull the water in, they hold the soil together, they help with erosion, they help with cleaning and filtering runoff, they help with shade, they add oxygen, take out carbon dioxide, they create a habitat for animals, and food," Kiorpes said. "There are a lot of things trees do, that we forget until we sit under a nice, big tree."