

southerners

## Nature Rules at This School

Live catfish, a cave, and the call of birds figure into the interactive design of this school, which was built around the theme of natural resources and conservation.

**S**mokey Bear Welcomes You,” proclaims the Forest Service’s famous furry icon on the entrance sign at Munford Elementary School. At this Alabama school near the Talladega National Forest, each of the 800 kindergartners through sixth graders is smarter than the average bear when it comes to conservation and the environment.

### A Community Effort

The facility, opened in August of 2001, physically depicts and promotes aspects of the great outdoors in every nook and cranny. “The Enchanted Forest” wing, for kindergarten through second grade students, focuses on plants and trees. Third and fourth graders learn about animals and wildlife in the wing called “Where the Wild Things Are.” And water issues become clear to fifth and sixth graders in “The Main Stream” hallways.

Citizens in this rural eastern Alabama area voted two to one for a \$5 million tax increase to build the new school. Donations and grants from government agencies and businesses provided funding for murals, exhibits, and other thematic aspects.

Schoolchildren enter the building through a realistic-looking cave, complete with stalactites. “We just don’t have the bats,” says Johnny Ponder, a procurement forester who sits on the school board.

A stone path runs the length of the hallway, while natural-looking trees “grow” from the walls. “These are scientifically accurate enough so that children can learn to identify those trees,” says Nancy Cotter, assistant superintendent.



**above:** The cafeteria features a streambed mural and a 250-gallon aquarium. “I’ve seen schools where they decorate along a theme, but I think this is very original in that the school was actually constructed along the theme,” says superintendent Cindy Elsberry.

### Bringing Nature Inside

Each wing features exhibits that continue the school’s overall theme: “Discovering Through Nature, The Enchantment of Learning.” In the cafeteria, students gaze at native fish swimming in a 250-gallon aquarium.

“One of the children stopped me in the hall one morning and said, ‘Dr. Huddleston, we have the food chain going on in the lunchroom,’” says principal Alice Huddleston. Another school’s principal might assume a food fight was underway in the cafeteria. Not Alice—her faith was immediately confirmed by the child’s next message: “There’s a fish tail sticking out of a big bass’s mouth.”

### Well-rounded Students

Even though the forest industry figures prominently in this community, officials quickly dismiss the notion that the school aims to graduate 800 future foresters. Well-rounded citizens are the goal. They want students who understand the complex interaction of



**above:** The award-winning school guides students down the path of environmental awareness with its decor and interactive exhibits.

the environment and the need to keep it clean and healthy, while at the same time using products responsibly.

Jeff Seefeldt, a Talladega Ranger District employee, notes, “If we had had this school or a series of these schools 30 or 40 years ago, maybe we wouldn’t have the water issues we have now.” NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON

PHOTOGRAPHS: MARK SANDLIN