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CONTACT

Matt Schnabel, SCFC Environmental Education Coordinator
(803) 896-8892 | MSchnabel@scfc.gov

Deaton named SC PLT Outstanding Educator of the Year

COLUMBIA — Cynthia Deaton of Clemson has been named the 2018 South Carolina Project Learning Tree Jerry L. Shrum Outstanding Educator of the Year. She was selected by the South Carolina PLT Steering Committee in May.

Deaton is an associate professor in the College of Education at Clemson University, where she provides PLT-based environmental education opportunities to students and staff.

“In my professional development workshops and undergraduate courses, I integrate Project Learning Tree curriculum because of the way it allows me to expand what I do in the classroom,” said Deaton. “It provides teachers with content, resources and activities that they can use to support an inquiry-based classroom. As they participate in PLT activities and begin to explore their impact on the environment, teachers see how and why environmental education is important.”



Cynthia Deaton

Deaton’s commitment to environmental education began in 2001 as a public high school teacher in Brunswick, Georgia. After attending a PLT training session, she immediately began implementing PLT into her biology and physical science courses and her work with kids outside of schools. This love of environmental science continued with her work as a facilitator for other practicing teachers while receiving her graduate degree at the University of Georgia. There, she helped develop and implement a year-long professional development experience focused on teaching environmental science in the elementary classroom.

When she left the University of Georgia to work at the University of Mississippi, she began working with Mississippi Project Learning Tree facilitators to train her undergraduate students (preservice elementary science teachers) and encourage these future teachers to engage their students in becoming stewards of their environment.

At Clemson, she has implemented PLT into 2-3 cohorts of elementary education students (18-26 students per cohort) each year. She continues to implement the PreK-8th grade curriculum into science education courses for elementary education majors, special education majors and early childhood majors. Deaton has also worked with multiple preservice and in-service teachers to modify PLT activities to address state and school initiatives, meet the needs of their diverse student population, and use them to develop inquiry-based lessons. She has supported in-service teachers in finding ways to use PLT activities to encourage and reinforce 21st century skills, inquiry-based instruction and mobile learning.

In addition to integrating the PreK-8th grade PLT curriculum into her science methods coursework each year, Deaton has been dedicated to providing PLT training and support to teachers. She has co-facilitated PLT at Camp Read-a Rama workshop for reading teachers and facilitated PLT at a SC Botanical Garden teacher workshop for PreK-3rd grade teachers. One of her passions, however, has been to support high-needs teachers in receiving PLT curriculum training and support. To do that, Cynthia co-authored grant proposals for multi-year professional development workshops that partnered with one or more high-needs school districts.

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Project Learning Tree is a nationwide, award-winning environmental education program that supplements curricula used by teachers, parents, and community leaders for students from preschool to 12th grade. A program of the Sustainable Forestry Initiative, PLT uses trees and forests as windows on the world to advance environmental literacy and promote stewardship to students while fostering professional development among the educators who use it. In South Carolina, PLT is sponsored by the Forestry Association of South Carolina’s SC Forestry Foundation, the SC Forestry Commission and the State Department of Education.