

“I got one!” the little boy cries excitedly, carefully grasping a wriggling creature in one hand and a net in the other. A fan club of other children quickly assembles around him, staring with interest at his find. The animal waves its red claws, looking strange and alien with its long antennae and fan-shaped tail. A loud splashing noise further down the creek turns heads as another delighted cry of discovery resounds. Clearly, it’s a good day for crayfish catching.

But these kids aren’t just out for the glory of the hunt. Their adventure serves a higher purpose – one of literature, science and art. It all sprang from an idea that teacher Lisa Livelybrooks envisioned three years ago.

“Kids really need to have some sort of visual so they can connect to what they’re learning,” says Livelybrooks, a biology teacher at Crow Middle/High School near Eugene, Ore.

During the summer, she runs a day camp for kids, and over the course of a week, they create an illustrated book. Keep in mind, this isn’t an everyday children’s story. Instead of featuring a wicked witch or a fire-breathing dragon, Livelybrooks and the kids choose an invasive species as their antagonist.

“Our first book was not an invasive species book,” Livelybrooks admits, “but when I started going to the invasive species workshops, I decided to have invasives be the reason for the book.”

And from there, the ideas kept rolling. For her first invasive species book, Livelybrooks chose to focus on zebra mussels. The kids still needed a muse, and Livelybrooks provided one in the form of a shoe encrusted with invasive mussels. Inspired by the mussels’ invasive capabilities, the kids crafted a story about a fisherman named Bob who unwittingly transports invasive zebra mussels into a formerly pristine environment. They illustrated the story with stamps cut out of fun foam and dipped in tempera paints.

In the next installment, written a year later, Bob’s gardening wife Carol Sue plants the highly invasive yellow flag iris in her garden. Despite the imploring of her daughter Bobbie Sue, Carol Sue refuses to get rid of her invasive plant until Bob sees yellow flag iris growing near his favorite fishing hole. Concerned, he brings a wildlife biologist to convince Carol Sue that yellow flag iris is a dangerous invader, and she subsequently removes the plant from her garden.

But first, Livelybrooks wanted the kids to see what the golden flower really looked like.

“When we chose to write about yellow flag iris, we knew there was an invasion of them right down by the river,” Livelybrooks says. “We really got a feel for how hard it was to dig them up, and it was pretty clear that once they take hold, they’re hard to get rid of.”

For every story, Livelybrooks finds a way to inspire the kids with real life experiences. The most recent installment, featuring invasive crayfish, started with an expedition to a local creek. Armed with pieces of chicken tied to sticks for bait, the children braved the cold waters and had close encounters of the crustacean kind.

Fortunately, only natives were caught that day. In their book, Livelybrooks and the kids wrote about the invasive red swamp crayfish as a class pet and how it can cause trouble when released into the wild.

Once the storyline is negotiated and the illustrations are made, Livelybrooks takes the story home, scans in the pictures, and sends the whole thing to iBook, a book publishing service. A grant through the Lane Library League helps pay for printing, and before long, the kids have created a glossy-paged masterpiece.

“It’s a real book,” Livelybrooks points out, “and the kids get really jazzed about it.”

In a beautiful blend of disciplines, the books allow kids to be creative and learn about science at the same time. Plus, the activity is easily adaptable for a classroom setting during the school year.

“After the kids have some sort of hands-on experience, like catching crawdads, they could each write their own story,” Livelybrooks suggests. “There could be a contest to have one book printed, or there could be one story that everyone helps to illustrate.”

From zebra mussels to crayfish, invasive species once again prove to be a great learning tool. And besides that, it’s a great excuse to spend the afternoon searching for crayfish.

To read or purchase the books that Livelybrooks and her summer camp create, visit [???](#). All proceeds go towards [???](#).