

and broadcast in part via the Internet at the Provider Pals Web site: www.providerpals.com.

"When I was in middle school, I was the school president, and we celebrated Earth Day in 1970 by picking up garbage," said Bruce Vincent, a logger and founder of Provider Pals. "That was shortly after the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland caught on fire. We didn't have a Clean Air Act. We didn't have a Clean Water Act. We didn't have an Endangered Species Act. It's 37 years later and we have learned a lot. We should celebrate what we have learned and what we have changed, and then take a look at our challenges."

Provider Pals is an urban-rural cultural exchange program, at the heart of which is the adoption of a natural resource provider — a farmer, a logger, a miner, a rancher or a fisherman — by a school.

Students and the adopted provider correspond over the course of the school year about the work of the provider, and then the providers visit their schools to show the tools they use and the gear they wear.

Mabelvale, which offers an environmental science program, has participated in the Provider Pals program for five years, one of the first five schools outside Montana to join the network that has grown to about 20 schools in locations such as Washington D.C., Detroit, Miami, Los Angeles, New York City, and Vancouver, British Columbia. Social studies teacher Heidi Campbell directs the project at Mabelvale.

"It lights something up in a kid," Halmay, the 37-year sea urchin diver, said about his sharing his work experiences and the creatures of the sea. "Seeing that is really a nice thing for me. And then they say, 'This is the best day I've had in school.' They still relate it to school and education, but it's different."

Students gingerly passed the sea urchin, kelp and assorted starfish

that Halmay hauled halfway across the country in coolers. Then Halmay guided a student in the use of a metal tool to crack open the urchin. He offered the willing but cautious students a taste.

"It tastes good; it's salty," said Tyshawn Porter, a seventh-grader, the first to try it. He acknowledged that he had eaten sushi before.

Vernon Davis, another seventh-grader, is one of about eight pupils and two staff members from Mabelvale who will travel to Montana for a week this summer to visit the ranches, mines and logging camps. Mabelvale pupils have been making the summer trip and staying at a restored ranger station in each of the past four years.

"I think the ranchers are the most interesting," Vernon said about the providers. "That's because I like horses and animals."

Downs, one of the ranchers, said his purpose in the Provider Pals program is to help students realize the source of the food and supplies they use.

"We just want to let the kids know that the store isn't making it in a back room," Downs said, "but there are actually people who work hard every day to provide all of our food."

"And it's the cheapest and safest food they'll ever have," Fritz, another rancher, was quick to add. "If you eat, you are involved in agriculture. The students just don't realize it," she said and pointed to beef products in toothpaste, car tires, marshmallows and camera film.

Gary Wahl, owner of WD Logging Inc., in Antoine in Pike County, has met with students at Mabelvale and in Washington, D.C., about recent changes in the timber industry, including efforts to replant forests and make the industry safer.

"We're trying to get across to these kids that what we are doing really isn't a bad thing," Wahl said. "Lumber is a renewable resource. A lot of people think we just rape and plunder the land. I'm hoping I can get them to see logging and the timber industry in a better light."

Vincent said he and his wife initiated Provider Pals, which is funded in part by Ford Motor Co. and Caterpillar Foundation, after seeing the success of wildlife programs in which students "adopted" grizzly bears or other animals.

The program expanded after Vincent testified before a congressional committee and realized that lawmakers had little understanding of his industry. He walked around Washington, D.C., until he found a school, then went in and asked the principal if he wanted to adopt a logger.

Rural and urban Americans need to build cultural bridges, he said.

"We all live in the same place. We all love the environment.

We're all involved in the web of life," Vincent said. "That's a cliché but we are. We don't know much about each other. The consumer buying a board at Home Depot knows very little about the person who whacked the tree down to make the board. The person who whacked the tree down knows very little about the person buying the board. We ought to meet. We are involved in this together."