

A-State offering students courses on marine mammals

BY ALDEMARO ROMERO
SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Arkansas State University students will be able to get courses on an unusual subject for people in a land-locked state: marine mammals. From learning about the diversity of these creatures to being able to dissect some of them, these courses offer a variety of topics very popular among college students.

In the spring of 2009 Arkansas State University will offer two marine mammal courses — one is a lecture class and the other is a laboratory class. In the first one students will learn about the diversity of whales, dolphins, sea lions, seals, manatees, sea otters and other marine mammals, together with their anatomy, physiology, behavior, ecology and conservation.

The lab course includes training on identifying

more than 60 skeletons and skulls of the same number of species from all over the world. Among the unusual specimens the students will study will be skulls of an extinct giant manatee from Russia, another skull from the oldest species of whale, 50 million years old, now extinct, and the tusk of a narwhal that served as inspiration for the creation of the unicorn myth.

Exciting dissection

Probably the most exciting activity for the students will be the dissection of marine mammals that have been found dead on beaches in the United States. In the past, students have dissected and/or mounted the skeletons of an elephant seal, a porpoise, a sea otter, and a manatee.

Cleaned and mounted skeletons are exhibited in The Hall of Science, a

public exhibit at the Lab Science East building of the Jonesboro ASU campus. Admission to that exhibit is free.

Among other unusual experiences for the students will be the preparation of minke whale baleens. Whales use baleens, which are made of keratin, the same substance as human nails, to filter out food from the ocean.

Arkansas State has a special permit from the federal government to receive and study marine mammals. Marine mammals are protected by federal law since most of them are considered either endangered or vulnerable species.

Other activities

Other experiences for these students include identification of species based on the sounds they produce. Not only can each individual species be

recognized by the different sounds they generate but also each individual marine mammal can be recognized by their sounds. Students will do so by using a computer program also used for human voice identification.

Plans are being drafted to offer a field course during the spring break that will take students to either the Caribbean or California to study these creatures in their natural environment.

By the end of these experiences it is expected that students will become really knowledgeable of some of the most intriguing animals of the world.

For more information, contact the ASU Department of Biological Sciences at biology@astate.edu.

Romero is chairman and professor at the Department of Biological Sciences at Arkansas State University.