



## Chilling Out with Trout and CHS Science Teacher, Peter Stetson

'It takes a village' (and grants) to raise fish indoors.

By Lauren Costa

Peter Stetson, State Environthon President, stands under shirts from past competitions. Russ Waterman

It is an unlikely place for trout to be raised.

But [Coventry High School](#) science teacher, Peter Stetson, has a can-do attitude in helping students learn more about brook trout, conservation and the environment.

"This year we received a \$1,500 grant for a new chilling unit through the Narragansett

Chapter of Trout Unlimited," said the 30-year science educator. "It will arrive any day and will give us a chance to raise and study trout longer during the school year."

Sixty or so trout fingerlings donated from a RI DEM Fish Hatchery in North Kingstown have been kept and fed in an aquarium since late December. "The air temperature is kept at 40 degrees and the water temperature at 49-50 degrees," Stetson said. adding a small refrigeration unit has been used since 1998. "We feed them ground-up fish food."

Once large enough, trout are moved to 685 and 450-gallon tanks. Swirl separators will funnel waste into PVC pipes with special biofilters to break down harmful bacteria. "We have grown bok choy hydroponically from nutrients in the water after solids have been filtered out," he said. "The cafeteria has used them in salads."

This year this unique trout environmental science project is under the direction of a student. "Senior Kaylee Brennan is a student intern raising and studying the growth of the trout," Stetson said. "She is interested in aquaculture as a possible career."

Courtesy of another grant, Stetson obtained the largest tank and filtration system from a source right down the road. "Gail and Kirk Hermann, owners of [Koi Villa 2 Gardening Center](#), helped me set it up and have always answered questions and assisted me when I had any problems."

Stetson, 2007 Southern Rhode Island Conservation Teacher of the Year, is also working on other projects besides his regular classes in biology and earth science

His students have mapped trails outside the school using a compass, tape, computers and sometimes GPS on cell phones; tested soil, grown plants in the school greenhouse and have used GIS, or Geographic Information Systems, or remote sensing technology.

As advisor for the Coventry Envirothon Club, Stetson prepares them for state competition to test their skills in forestry, soil science and environmental issues. Coventry won the state championship in 2004 and 2007 to qualify for the National Envirothon Championships.

A few years ago he led students and some of their parents on a study of the rain forest in Costa Rica, "the longest field trip in Coventry High School history," he noted.

He said several former students have gone on to study forestry, natural sciences, soil science and even organic pasture management after attending institutions renowned for environmental science such as Unity College (ME), Paul Smith's College (NY), and Warren Wilson College (NC).

But it is not unusual for the Coventry HS Science Department to lead the way statewide in teaching students about the environment and conservation.

"Our Science Department under Chair Kathleen Sullivan won the John H. Chafee Conservation Leadership Award for water quality study on the Pawtuxet River in 2000," he proudly explained.

As for the trout that are raised, they may or may not end up at the end of a fork on a plate.

"We used to cook and eat them at the end of the year. Now when they reach about 1 to 1 1/4 pounds we release them in Carbuncle Pond in late April and early May. We would like to be involved in a fish-tagging program so that if you catch one, you can send us the tag to describe how big it was and when you caught it."

There is always something cooking for Stetson, the activist teacher with the mismatched (colored) sneakers, offbeat ties and conservation-minded attitude.

"I have so much fun doing this," he said with a twinkle in his eyes.