Shouldn’t learning about science be exciting?

That was the idea behind an “Adventure Learning” workshop held in Cooper Landing in October 2015, in which high school science teachers from across the Kenai Peninsula learned ways to engage their students in outdoor educational activities.

“Its purpose was to get teachers out into the field to basically experience what it’s like to be a researcher, and to take those experiences into their classrooms so that their students can be more engaged and excited about science,” explained Courtney Breest, EPSCoR’s University of Alaska Anchorage outreach coordinator and the event organizer.

Breest based the project on an effort by Idaho’s EPSCoR program, which involves students in activities like visiting aquatic restoration sites and hiking and biking through local natural areas. This summer, she attended a weeklong teacher training event in Coeur D’Alene to learn more about the program. “I was mostly tuning in to what was really engaging these teachers, and what I could mimic in Alaska.”

With help from Southcentral Test Case researchers and individuals from the Idaho program, Breest then put on a pilot Adventure Learning workshop for five high school science teachers from Anchorage, Kenai, Soldotna and Homer. The group began with a hike to Russian River Falls, where EPSCoR faculty Dan Rinella presented on salmon ecology. “The teachers just started peppering him with questions,” Breest noted. “Since we had such an expert in this field he was able to respond, to go in depth as much or as little as they wanted.” The teachers followed that up with a water quality assessment activity in the river and a tour of the Kenaitze Tribe’s K’Beq’ interpretive site.

On the second day, researchers demonstrated technology for the teachers, including EPSCoR’s Augmented-Reality Sandbox and SalmonSim visualization program. A partner from the Kenai Watershed Forum also presented on local resources, and the day concluded with a visit to Exit Glacier and a presentation by an expert on glacial recession and climate change.

Breest said the workshop served as a first step for teachers to create their own adventure learning lesson plans. She has continued to liaise with the teachers, including working with Homer students on a sediment-coring project in January 2016, and plans to take the sandbox to the teachers in Anchorage and Kenai schools. She also said Idaho and Alaska EPSCoR are working together on a grant proposal to fund further teacher training, based on the enthusiastic responses from the teachers.

“They kept saying over and over again, my students need this. My students need to see how the real world is affecting their real lives,” Breest said. “When you’re just in a classroom talking about science day in and day out, the message isn’t getting through.”