EcoTrek Fitness takes training out of the gym

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It's not all that unusual to see a group of friends out walking or jogging together.

When that same group unties a large rubber band from around their waists and wraps it around a tree (or handrail, swing set or picnic table) to do resistance training, it's at this point that casual passersby might say, "what, the wha?"

EcoTrek Fitness is an original program, not a franchise, developed in 2006 by Cari Draft, a fitness trainer from Grand Haven.

From her website www.ecotrekfitness.com Draft describes EcoTrek as a 75-minute outdoor group workout that integrates cardio, strength training and flexibility.

They are held several times a week, year 'round, at one of many different "series areas," no matter what the weather.

"My original idea is to get people out of the gym," said Draft. "Instead of being stuck on a treadmill looking at reruns on the television, I want to get people outside enjoying the beauty of west Michigan. We meet in rain, snow or sunshine and there is no such thing as bad weather, only bad choices in clothing."

EcoTrekkers wrap their bands around trees (or playground equipment, whatever presents tself along the way) to do resistance training. *(Shopper News Photo by Doug Allen)*

Wendy Rahn (center) leads an EcoTrek group up a hill recently on the campus at KCC. Halfway up the hill she had them do lunges to make things interesting. *(Shopper News Photo by Doug Allen)*

An American Council on Exercise certified fitness trainer, Draft obtained her additional outdoor certification while attending a training program held at Nike headquarters in Beaverton, OR in May, 2006.

Two weeks later she led a group of friends and acquaintances on an inaugural EcoTrek session in the sand dunes near Grand Haven.

"We utilize both naturally occurring geography like hills and trees, but also such man-made props as bleachers and picnic tables," she said. "We always incorporate stretching somewhere in the session. It's that kind of variety that is a key element to the program's success."

EcoTrek Fitness outings are available throughout west Michigan with series leaders in cities from Traverse City to Kalamazoo.

In Sept. 2011, Wendy Rahn became the newest EcoTrek series leader for the Battle Creek area.

A Kellogg employee, Rahn has previously managed the Kellogg Company fitness centers, she taught swimming and was a lifeguard at the Battle Creek Family YMCA and received her Personal Fitness Trainer Certification from the International Sports Sciences Association in 1998.

Along with her duties organizing EcoTrek outings she owns her own personal training business, Imminent Physique.

"I'd say there are two different kinds of areas that we trek in," said Rahn. "There's the woodsy area like Ott Biological Preserve and the urban setting. For example we use the playground equipment at Riverside Elementary School or Verona. We'll stop and do pushups and then throw the bands over the monkey bars or swings to do resistance training. Basically we utilize the terrain that's all around us."

Along with the resistance work and the bands they carry with them around their waists, they run stairs at Kellogg Community College and Leila Arboretum. Sometimes while running up a hill Rahn will stop her group and have them perform lunges while working up the incline.

"It's just nice being outside and being with people, getting a workout and having fun with it," she said. "It's great, you're not on a treadmill starring at the same thing and you can go at your own pace."

Rahn wanted to make it clear that this group is for anyone, no matter what their conditioning is.

"You do not need to be an elite athlete to EcoTrek with us," she said. "We encourage everyone to travel at their own pace. We had a couple women who are pregnant join us at Ft. Custer last weekend. They did great. You can walk and talk or push it hard, it doesn't matter. We all gather up at certain stops to do resistance training with the bands, or run stairs and then push on. It's all ages, men and women, and the intensity is what they make it."

Rahn said her group trains twice a week (Sunday at 8:30 a.m. and Wednesday evening at 5:45 p.m.) and locations (rotating from Woodland Park, Leila Arboretum, Ott Biological Preserve and Grever's Nature Center) can be verified by checking www.ecotrekfitness.com and scrolling to schedule and locations. Further questions can be directed to wendy.deanne@yahoo.com

"Anyone is welcome to join us," she said. "We provide the bands. Dress for the weather and bring good shoes."

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