

How horseshoe crabs helped pen pals

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Principal Hsieh Chih-wei, right, English teacher Andrew Stewart, back, and students from Jinhu Junior High School in Kinmen County pose in front of a globe at the school's campus on Wednesday last week in anticipation of a visit from their French pen pals between April 12 and 20.

Photo: CNA

Students from Jinhu Junior High School on the outlying island county of Kinmen are excited about an upcoming visit from their French pen pals, whom they are determined to impress with local charm and horseshoe crabs.

Jinhu's English teachers have been brainstorming an itinerary that should make for an unforgettable trip to Kinmen in April for the visitors from College Pablo Neruda in Aulnay-sous-Bois, a small town in the northeastern suburbs of Paris.

Jinhu students and teachers in November last year flew to France to visit College Pablo Neruda because of a relationship between the two schools that started with an exchange of letters between the students.

In return, they plan to take their French visitors to search for Kinmen's iconic Wind Lion God (風獅爺) and to see horseshoe crabs, said Andrew Stewart, who teaches English at Jinhu Junior High School.

The guests would be treated to a boat tour, a rarity for students from an urban school, he said.

No one is taking the preparations lightly as the Kinmen school of about 440 students gets ready to host the foreign guests — a group of 14 students and two teachers — who are scheduled to visit Kinmen from April 12 to 20.

The Pablo Neruda students would stay with host families, attend classes with their Jinhu pen pals, visit tourist and cultural attractions, and visit the Kinmen Fisheries Research Institute, where they would get to see horseshoe crabs up close, Jinhu Junior High School principal Hsieh Chih-wei (謝志偉) said.

Horseshoe crabs, called *Hou* (鬚) in Mandarin, have played an important role in facilitating the East Asia trip by the French students from a financially disadvantaged town of 80,000.

According to data from France's National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies, Aulnay-sous-Bois had a poverty rate of 26.3 percent in 2014, much higher than the national average of 14.1 percent.

The median annual income of town residents was 17,036 euros (US\$20,977 at the current exchange rate) in 2014, far lower than the national average of 20,150 euros, while the unemployment rate stood at 19.7 percent, almost double the national average of 10.4 percent, according to the data.

Those numbers highlight the financial situation faced by the families of some Pablo Neruda students.

Yann Reby, the English teacher at Pablo Neruda who first initiated the student exchange program with the Kinmen school in 2013, was attracted to the island and its horseshoe crabs because they do not exist in Europe.

"By talking about a small island, about horseshoe crabs, we raised sponsors' imagination," Reby said.

There is also a big difference from "a field trip in common places like Europe, Ireland or Britain because that does not impress people as much," he added.

The horseshoe crabs did increase interest and the French school managed to secure funding from Bank BNP Paribas, the local government and several associations for a 19-day trip to Taipei and Kinmen, he said.

Kinmen, an island group off southern China, is one of only a handful of places in Taiwan where Asian horseshoe crabs — widely known as "living fossils" because they have existed for at least 400 million years — can still be observed.

Once a common sight in coastal areas of Taiwan, the largest mudflat invertebrate has only been rarely spotted in Chiayi County, Taichung and New Taipei City's Tamsui in recent years, due to the destruction of its habitat by land development, Kinmen Fisheries Research Institute specialist Li Chin-chao (黎錦超) said.