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Legacy Takes Students Outdoors for Science Lessons

Hands-on education program introduces high school students to SFWMD public lands



Students from two high schools recently experienced science in action through Legacy, a new South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) environmental education program. The hands-on program connects water resource and environmental education with land management activities by partnering local high schools with District-managed public lands.

Recently, Clark Advanced Learning Center students visited DuPuis Management Area, and Osceola County School of the Arts students visited the Reedy Creek Management Area, to collect information that will add to the knowledge and experience relied on by District land managers to make real-world decisions.

“Students who explore District lands through Legacy today will be stewards of these irreplaceable natural areas in the future,” said SFWMD Governing Board Vice Chair Jerry Montgomery. “This program is about building connections between our youth and publicly owned lands that are vital to Florida’s water resources and ecology.”

Originally developed by the St. Johns River Water Management District, the Legacy program utilizes the SFWMD’s expertise in land management, water resource and environmental science to create classroom-specific activities tailored to certain sites.

The goals of the program include:

- Strengthening the connection of District lands with water resource and environmental education
- Providing communities with new opportunities to benefit from public lands
- Enhancing environmental stewardship in youth
- Encouraging recreational use of public lands

“We hope this educational program creates a bond between students and these natural areas — and maybe even inspires some of them to become land managers,” said Governing Board member Kevin Powers.

The 12 Clark Advanced Learning Center students participating in Legacy at DuPuis are taking an environmental science class through a dual-enrollment program offered by their school and Indian River State College. On their recent visit, the students were trying to determine what types of plants were growing within a one-square-meter sampling area thick with saw palmetto.

Osceola County School for the Arts students are participating in Legacy through the Osceola County Schools Environmental Study Center. From sampling areas at the site, students recorded details about gopher tortoise burrows, including their size and whether they appeared to be active or inactive.

Information collected by students will help land managers at DuPuis and Reedy Creek build a picture of how habitats respond to management efforts, including prescribed burning, hydrologic restoration and exotic plant control.

“The cool thing is the professionals aren’t doing it for us. They’re helping us do it ourselves,” said School for the Arts junior Rebeca Gurnica.

Through Legacy, students can interact with the environment in a way that inspires them to value South Florida’s conservation lands and encourage others to do the same, said Dan Thayer, SFWMD Director of the Vegetation and Land Management Department.

The 22,000-acre DuPuis Management Area in western Martin County is one of four sites around the 16-county District that are part of the Legacy program in 2010-2011. The multi-use natural area is interspersed with numerous ponds, wet prairies, cypress domes, pine flatwoods and remnant Everglades marsh.

At the Osceola County Schools Environmental Study Center at Reedy Creek,

a riverine cypress swamp is located in the watershed of Reedy Creek, which connects Lake Russell to Cypress Lake and Lake Hatchineha. While floodplain swamp dominates, 13 additional communities, including rare dry prairie, mesic flatwoods and scrub are also found.

The other two Legacy sites for 2010-2011 are:

- **Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed (CREW) Marsh** – Lee and Collier Counties.
- **Loxahatchee Impoundment Landscape Assessment (LILA)** – Palm Beach County.