Students help to plant trees, grass

SAVING THE COAST

By Katrina A. Canedo

The students from St. Rose High School plant trees and grass to help save the coast. The project is part of the local efforts to protect Louisiana's coastline from erosion and to improve the environment. The students are part of a broader initiative to educate and involve the community in the fight against coastal loss.
Marsh

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Pam Blanchard, one of the project coordinators with the LSU Sea Grant College Program. "They'll seed it with grass seeds later, but for now, it'll have something a little more substantial down at the water's edge to hold the dirt in place."

Students also planted wax myrtle, which, unlike black mangrove, is not suited to sit in water, a little closer to the levee.

"The wax myrtle is a very prolific seed-bearing plant, so it will put down roots, and that will help it do a good job of setting itself up as a secondary line of plants," said Blanchard.

Organizers said the project benefits the levee and the students.

"This shows them that they can help and actually lets them see, hands-on, how serious the problem is," said Jess Currie, acting administrator for Lafourche Parish's coastal zone management office.

"The wetlands are being destroyed at an alarming rate, and by being involved, being in the Science Society, we can take steps by planting in our school," said Chris Nakamoto, 17, a junior at Grace King.

Students at Grace King began planting black mangrove, wax myrtle and southern bald cypress last year, said science teacher Marie Tizzard, and the project was such a hit with students that a few of them re-instituted the school's Science Society so they could stay involved with the project.

Two of those students are juniors Charell Reynolds, 16, and Hanna Mesraty, 17.

Both said the project left them with a sense of involvement, a feeling that they could "do something" to better their communities and beyond.

"It's really doing something important, something that will help us later on when the plants start to grow," said Reynolds, who was not accustomed to being in the marsh or near water. "It's the first time I've actually been this close to the water. I'm really not used to this, but it's interesting."

And exciting, said Mesraty.

"Being involved, we know that maybe a 100 years from now, the ecosystem will be supported by the plants we helped to grow," she said.

Other students have similar feelings about the project and have become so involved in learning about coastal ecology and botany in general that they've even replanted the school's courtyard.

"The kids are very enthusiastic about the project, and, hopefully, they'll develop a sense of stewardship because now they can actually see what's going on and what they can do to help," said Tizzard, who invited her colleague, Kiko Sunderland, a chemistry teacher at West Jefferson High School, and a few of her students to participate.

"We've wanted to collaborate on projects for a while, and we're trying to bridge the gap between our schools on the east and west banks," said Sunderland. "We want the students to feel more as a community, and so far it's going pretty well."

A day's worth of ecology lessons outside the classroom seemed to help.

"We can try to teach them coastal ecology and wetlands preservation in the classroom, but it means nothing to them if they can't see it," said Sunderland.

Two of Sunderland's West Jefferson students, sisters Elizabeth, 17, and Joy Castellanos, 16, both seniors, said the experience was educational and enjoyable.

"It's fun to be doing things and know that what you're doing helps," said Joy.

"It seems so little, but it helps so much," said Elizabeth. "If we could do something to help others, that would be cool."

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