Seeding wetlands through trees

River Parishes News

Planting project used to teach coastal lesson

Thursday March 25, 2004

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Her feet clad in a pair of shiny, white tennis shoes, 15-year-old Shaneé Turner stood on a spade-like planting tool known as a dibble and drove it into the muddy ground.

The ninth-grader pushed the dibble forward and pulled it back, carving a spike-shaped depression in the middle of a drained crawfish pond near Des Allemands.

A classmate, Tyler Jasmin, gingerly pulled a bald cypress seedling from a plastic tube and placed it in the hole. A third student, Alisha Bailey, dropped in a sprinkle of fertilizer. Turner covered the roots, and the group moved on to its next planting.
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Of the three St. James Science and Math Academy students, only Turner had prior tree-planting experience: "Oranges," she said. "But they always died."

Organizers of the planting program, part of the Louisiana Sea Grant wetlands restoration initiative, said they expect many of the approximately 160 seedlings planted Wednesday to follow the fate of Turner's orange trees.

But they're pinning their hopes on a different sort of root taking hold: student awareness of Louisiana's rapidly diminishing wetlands.

As marshland subsides into the Gulf of Mexico and the region's swamp waters are filled in for development, the 75 students on Wednesday were being trained as the next generation of nature's stewards.

"We're not just planting the trees and then taking the students on a field trip later to see them, but trying to work with their attitude toward nature," said Catherine "Kiki" Karsh, an LSU horticultural graduate student working with Sea Grant's grade school-oriented Coastal Roots program.

Besides instructing the students in the finer arts of planting trees, Karsh travels to St. James and other schools at least once a month to teach about how trees and other plant life tie directly into wetland survival. Cypress trees, for example, offer habitat for birds and other wildlife, and their roots prevent soil erosion.

The land being replanted Wednesday was cleared of its native cypress about a century ago, said the property's owner, Ray Matherne.

For the past 30 years, he said, the land has been used as a crawfish farm.

As the new trees grow, Matherne said he wants to construct 35 cypress-wood homes on a small rise of land overlooking the planting grounds. The asking price on the homes will range from $77,000 to $350,000, he said.

Dianne Lindstedt, the Coastal Roots coordinator, said she sees no contradiction between Matherne's development ambitions and her program.

"Part of the problem with this is finding places to plant," she said. About half the cypress, live oak and wax myrtle seedlings planted were purchased using a $500 grant organized by two St. James science teachers, Sylvia Beard and Valerie Stewart. The rest of the seedlings were donated by a Baton Rouge elementary school that had leftovers from a similar planting.

Next year, when another group of St. James students returns, they will bring mangrove trees that this year's science students are growing.

"What they do now is going to come back to all of us tomorrow," Stewart said. "If you show it to them, they understand it."

After digging her dibble into the ground six times, Turner's white shoes

had lost some of their luster, the toes covered with a thin layer of dirt. But as she and her classmates slogged through a patch of mud toward their next planting, the outdoor classroom seemed to suit them just fine.

"I think they'll live, if we get a lot of rain," Turner said.

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