

24-Nov, 2008

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Students get involved in wetlands protection

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METAIRIE, La. -- At Archbishop Chapelle High School in Metairie, a chain-link, 10-foot by 10-foot pen resembling a kennel sits outside the cafeteria.

Built by classes of juniors and seniors, under the guidance of their environmental science teacher, Joann Haydel, the pen is the start of the school's first wetlands nursery with Louisiana State University's Coastal Roots program.

Directed by LSU's College of Education, the program has reached out to south Louisiana primary and high schools to grow wetlands plants as a way to help restore the coast and to integrate hands-on awareness of coastal erosion into science education, said LSU's Pam Blanchard.

Since its debut in 2000, Coastal Roots has spawned wetlands nurseries at 35 schools in 15 parishes statewide, most of them coastal parishes, and has contributed more than 21,000 plants to the wetlands.

"We learn about the geology, the life science of the area, and what we're doing to protect and save our wetlands," Haydel said. "We talk a lot about coastal stewardship, and the program is a way to tie it all in with something that's hands-on."

Before Hurricane Katrina, only one New Orleans school was involved in the program. After the double blows of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita obliterated 217 square miles of wetlands -- nearly half the loss researchers had projected to occur by the year 2050 -- schools began to take notice, Blanchard said. Now, 14 of them in greater New Orleans are Coastal Roots members.

"We were trying to find a better way to inform the K through 12 population of the problem (of coastal erosion)," Blanchard said. "When Katrina and Rita hit, a large number of people were severely impacted by that. (Schools) needed something their students could participate in ... to give back something to the community."

Haydel used a \$1,600 grant from the Brown Foundation, a local organization that gives out service learning grants, to buy equipment for the nursery and will purchase the smooth cordgrass the students will plant in the coming weeks.

Students built the nursery structure at Chapelle in October. The project included digging trenches and assembling PVC pipe for the irrigation system, erecting the fence and lining the pen with black matting. They will also have to install a pond for the aquatic plants, Haydel said.

The class will take a field trip this fall to scout its restoration site in Bayou Sauvage National Wildlife Refuge and to obtain cuttings of plants to propagate in the nursery.

In the spring, when the grasses have matured, the class will return to Bayou Sauvage and plant them, adding a bit more vegetation to the fast-disappearing wetlands.

"We want the kids to go out into the site, so they can see what it looks like," Blanchard said, noting the example of Fontainebleau State Park on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain, which is a project site for several other schools. "When our kids went out there, they stood in the middle of what used to be the forest, and the ranger told them, 'When we stood here three or four years ago, we couldn't see the sky. We would be standing in full shade.' The kids began to understand what really happened in the storm to these natural areas."

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Haydel plans to make the project an annual cycle, with each class contributing to the local ecology and expanding awareness of the much larger, more troubling big picture of coastal erosion, she said.

"I knew we were losing wetlands, but I didn't know how much," said Molly Smith, a junior.

"I didn't know it was so serious," added her classmate, Kimberly Martinez.

Information from: The Times-Picayune, <http://www.timespicayune.com>

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