

## Metairie Academy students plant trees to restore wetlands

BY BARRI BRONSTON  
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**METAIRIE** — With Jeff Villemarette leading the way, four students from Metairie Academy for Advanced Studies meandered through a maze of branches, twigs and fallen tree trunks.

Soon they found a spot to plant the saplings they had nurtured for the past nine months.

"Perfect," Villemarette, a parent chaperone, said as his daughter and her three classmates settled on a remote patch deep in Jean Lafitte National Park's Barataria Preserve.

The children, all fourth-graders, wasted no time in doing just as they had been instructed. Symantha Weaver made a hole in the ground using a dibble. Emma Villemarette dropped in fertilizer. Anthony Ficarra pulled a sapling from its cell. And Michael Modica placed the sapling in the hole.

Together, they used their feet to pack dirt around the young tree.

"We've lost a lot of the wetlands," Anthony said as he and his friends searched for more spots to plant their baby red

maples and bald cypresses. "I'm hoping that all of the land we lost can grow back."

Early on, Coastal Roots coordinator Pam Blanchard, who helps operate the program, guided students to find an appropriate spot on the Metairie Academy campus for a "can yard," a nursery production area where plants are raised until they are large enough to be moved to the coast.

After students returned from the 2007-08 winter break, they planted more than 1,000 seeds of native coastline plants and used much of their free time, including summer vacation, to care for them.

This month's trip to Jean Lafitte National Park, about 15 miles south of New Orleans, was the culmination of that effort, which produced almost 700 trees for transplanting.

"It'll help when hurricanes come," Aishu Natarajan, 9, said as she and her group scanned the park in search of an appropriate planting spot.

Mona Herbert, the Metairie Academy teacher who brought

the program to her school, said students get excited about contributing to nature and helping reverse coastal erosion.

"They're learning that vegetation replanting is one of the tools that we have to protect the land," Blanchard said.

In all, 35 schools in 15 parishes are participating in the program, up from 20 last year.