

Lafayette & Acadiana

Volunteering • In Focus

School's green efforts praised

Conservation project brings state award

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Students at Lafayette Middle School's Environmental Sciences Academy are deeply devoted to conservation.

Whether it's conservation of wetlands or the world as a whole.

The students' dedication to conservation have made them the Youth Conservationist of the Year for 2009. The award was given to them through the Louisiana Wildlife Federation.

Director Stacey Hess said the efforts are made possible through partnerships with the LSU Ag Center's Coastal Roots and Louisiana Marine Education Resources Native Fish in the Classroom.

With more than 150 students, Lafayette Middle was the first environmental sciences academy in Lafayette Parish. The program has now become a pathway program that can begin at L. Leo Judice Elementary School and take a student through

Lafayette Middle and finally to Northside High School's program.

Along with learning organic gardening, studying animals and Louisiana's environment, every grade level at Lafayette Middle has conservation projects.

The sixth graders are in charge of recycling for the school. Eight graders tend to worm farms and harvest their casting — waste that can be used in fertilizer.

And seventh graders focus the most on conservation with project planting cypress trees on Avery Island, restoring black mangroves to the wetlands on Grand Isle and raise native spoonville catfish, a fish on the threatened species list.

In three years seventh graders have planted about 1,000 cypress trees on Avery Island.

"Some of the McIlhennys' previous farmland they want to restore as a black bear habitat," Hess said. "The bears need a lot of land and they don't like open spaces."

The trees create corridors that allow bears to roam through to forests.

"It feels great to know we're helping the community," seventh grader Rachel Trahan said.

The students are proud of their efforts, pointing out that the black mangroves in Grand Isle could be the first defense against a hurricane.

"We're helping the people there," seventh-grader William Guilbeau said. "It's a barrier island and the black mangroves will help slow down a hurricane."

It could help slow coastal erosion and provide a place for migratory birds to land.