



PRESS-REGISTER

Students replenish beaches

Grasses in Classes grant funds dune grass project

Friday, April 06, 2007

By GRETA SHARP
Correspondent

Students from Murphy High School had some fun in the sun last week and, as a result, Dauphin Island visitors and residents need to watch where they step.

Marine biology students from the school traveled to the barrier island to plant dune grasses as a restoration effort.

The project is funded by a Grasses in Classes grant awarded to Mobile County Schools. Satsuma and Baker high schools are also participating in the program, with students from those schools planting marsh grasses.

The funds came from a U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service grant to the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program, which in turn is using it to finance the Mobile County Grasses in Classes Program. It is patterned after a similar program in Baldwin County.

Kara Lankford is the project coordinator for the Mobile Bay National Estuary Project, which is funded by the Environmental Protection Agency. It is one of 28 national estuary projects in the country.

Under the direction of Murphy marine biology teacher Sharon Delchamps and Lankford, the 18 students planted about 1,500 plants on the island's east end, which Delchamps said is the most vulnerable to erosion because the island migrates east to west due to the longshore current.

Lankford coordinates with the teachers, sets up planting sites and troubleshoots the process, including making sure items such as Terra-Sorb Gel are on hand, and directing the students on the best places to plant the dune grasses.

Due to current dry conditions, the Murphy students used the Terra-Sorb Gel to keep the plant roots moist. Lankford explained that the non-toxic crystals can absorb up to 200 times their weight in water, which is then released as the plants need it. As an added bonus, the gel contains potassium-based polymers rather than sodium-based ones, so it breaks down into fertilizer rather than salts that could damage the soil.

The approximately 100-yard stretch of beach where the students planted the grasses is just behind the Dauphin Island Sea Lab. Delchamps explained that it's not a heavily traveled tourist area, so there is less of a chance of the grasses being trampled. However, she plans to put up signs marking the area as a dune grass restoration project.

"Shoreline erosion is such a big deal these days," explained Delchamps. "We talk about how after a hurricane how much of the island erodes and how important it is that the sand accumulates around these plants and stabilizes the beach."

For her students, it has been easy to translate classroom knowledge into the practical application of dune renourishment.

While Lauren Tuohy, 18, enjoyed the beautiful weather, she said she also understands the long-term effect of the students' conservation efforts.

"Dauphin Island needs all the help it can get to rebuild plants and sea grasses," she said.

"We're trying to save the beaches from eroding away especially during hurricane season," agreed Jennifer

Swiger, 18. "The dune grasses soak up flood waters, which protects even Mobile from flooding."

For 16-year-old Antonio McInnes, protecting the barrier island from erosion and ensuring its existence for future generations makes sense.

"Anyone can do it," he explained. "School kids can do their part to help protect the bay and Dauphin Island."

Chris Chirino, 16, explained that the class has studied different estuaries, learning about the small animals that take shelter there.

According to the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program, an estuary is a partially enclosed coastal body of water. It is connected to the ocean so that the saltwater mixes with the inland freshwater. Estuaries are ecologically important, as well as sensitive, with marine life and waterfowl making homes there. Factors that negatively impact estuaries are sewage pollution, increased sedimentation and redamation of tidal land (<http://www.mobilebaynep.com/site/estuary/estuary.htm>).

"A lot is damaged by building things on top of it, and there's not enough left for them to hide in, so we build a man made sanctuary for them," explained Chirino. "It's really fun. I like it."

In between digging and planting, the students enjoyed a beautiful day on the beach, away from school. With Delchamps, they said, class is always interesting regardless the location.

Delchamps is a Murphy alumna. She graduated from Auburn University, then attended the University of South Alabama for graduate school, living at the sea lab and studying sea urchin predation in Florida grass beds. For seven years, Delchamps worked at the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, studying the contamination of song birds in the Mobile Delta. Additionally, she teaches biology at the University of South Alabama.

"She's the most amazing teacher I've ever had," Swiger said. "I enjoy her class so much. She taught me about going out on a boat for research and I'm thinking about doing that this summer."

"Her class is just a lot of fun," agreed Audrey Carrio, 18. "It's a really interesting class and it always has something to offer."

While Carrio enjoyed the school day spent on the beach, she also understands the importance of preserving the beach at the barrier island.

"It's helping the environment and Dauphin Island," she said.

The day after planting at the sea lab, the students returned to Dauphin Island to plant more dune grasses with Dauphin Island Mayor Jeff Collier at the island's golf course.

"He's concerned about shoreline erosion," said Delchamps. "We'll plant in an area that he can irrigate and care for."

As only about 10 percent of the planted grasses will survive, Delchamps plans to make this an annual program with her students, as well as checking back in a few weeks to see how the dune grasses are settling into their new home.

"We'll come back in late April, look and see how we've done and how many have survived," she said.

Lankford was pleased with the Murphy students' enthusiasm.

"They've already taken ownership of the project," she said. "They want to see them grow and do well. They are the future. What they learn today, they'll take with them into adulthood."

© 2007 Press-Register

© 2007 al.com All Rights Reserved.