

UF Wetlands Club Awarded for its Efforts in Sustainable Solutions April 1, 2011

The UF Wetlands Club was presented with the Sustainable Solutions Student Organization Award in Water Conservation from the UF Office of Sustainability. This is a yearly awards ceremony and nominations are judged "based upon their positive impact, the extent to which they have engaged others, and their ability to be expanded or replicated."

The University of Florida (UF) Wetlands Club was founded in 1995 with the mission of increasing awareness of the many values provided by wetland ecosystems. These activities were focused towards the campus community and beyond. Throughout the 2010-2011 academic year, members of the UF Wetlands Club have been actively promoting this mission, and two areas of involvement that highlight their commitment are their involvement in environmental education and clean-up activities.

Wetland ecosystems perform vital roles in improving the sustainability of local water resources, but public perception and understanding of this value is often lacking. One on-campus resource that the Wetlands Club has been able to utilize for environmental education is the Stormwater Ecological Enhancement Project (SEEP) wetland located within the Natural Areas Teaching Lab. When it was first constructed, the SEEP was a retention pond, with minimal vegetative diversity and functionality. In 1995, the UF Wetlands Club helped design an improved contoured basin, and today SEEP is both a functional stormwater retention basin and a diverse wetland ecosystem.

This year, a large focus of our environmental education has been providing interactive field-trips for local elementary and middle school students at SEEP. In the fall of 2010, the Wetlands Club led 6 SEEP tours, sharing a wetland experience with over 250 students from Rawlings Elementary School, Kanapaha Middle School, Glen Springs Elementary School, and Williams Elementary School. The students visited five stations throughout the SEEP area, where UF Wetlands Club members led hands-on lectures using SEEP as an example to talk about stormwater runoff, healthy wetlands and watersheds. At the "Soils" station, students felt soils of different textures, tested their permeability, and discussed the role wetland soils play in filtering stormwater pollutants. At the "Vegetation" station, students used sampling quadrats to compare upland and wetland plant species, and learned about the plant adaptations of a wetland environment. At the "Aquatic Life" station, students sampled aquatic macro-invertebrates, and learned about their importance as an indicator species for watershed health. At the "Water Quality" station, students used water sampling equipment to measure water quality parameters, and learned about what human activities can influence water quality. Finally, students were taken on a "Wetland Walk" where they got an opportunity to appreciate how the SEEP wetland achieves both goals of serving as a stormwater retention basin and a healthy wetland ecosystem.

We received extremely positive feedback from these field trips, and have developed detailed protocols with worksheets and visual aids for each station, which will allow club members to continue these programs in the future. As a club, we believe it is very important to get the youth in our community engaged and excited about important environmental issues. We are also planning to collaborate with the Florida Museum of Natural History to educate museum visitors about SEEP by providing an updated brochure at the museum, and exploring the possibility of offering a modified SEEP tour to museum visitors.

Environmentally sustainable behavior can only be realized if education and knowledge are acted upon. To bridge this necessary link, the UF Wetland Club has led and participated in numerous wetland clean-up efforts throughout the past year.

In November, UF Wetlands Club members led a clean-up of the Tumblin Creek floodplain. The Tumblin Creek floodplain flows through east Gainesville, 60% of which is characterized by impervious surfaces. The UF Wetlands Club has adopted this floodplain and conducts a clean-up every fall and spring semester - since 2004, the UF Wetlands Club has removed 11,894 pounds of trash and recycleables! We will hold our next clean-up on March 19, 2011 and we have invited the University of Florida School of Natural Resources and Environment Student Council to help in our effort. Additionally, approximately 20 UF Wetlands Club members also participated in the Great Suwannee River Clean-Up on December 4, 2010. Over 500 pounds of trash was removed from the Suwannee River floodplain long the stretch of river assigned to our club.

More recently, many UF Wetlands Club members participated in the UF Office of Sustainability's REstore Campus Clean-Up on February 5, 2011. Five UF Wetlands Club members were assigned as Site Leaders, overseeing volunteers from many other student organizations at clean-up sites across the UF campus. Additional UF Wetlands Club members were assigned to the wettest clean-up site on campus, Zone 4.