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Students plant hope for future of local waterways

Eelgrass project takes root at Hunter Springs with help from fifth-graders

By Julie Gorham

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Crystal River Primary School students put hard work and a splash of fun into helping save local waters on Friday at Hunter Springs Park.



Howard Miller from Gator Dredging informs Crystal River Primary School students on Friday about the importance of the proper and safe way to anchor a boat so seagrass is not destroyed. Miller's presentation was at one of a series of learning stations at Hunter Springs Park.

As kids from every fifth-grade class planted freshly grown "Rock Star" eelgrass plants in the springs area, they walked away with lifelong memories of being contributors to the health of the local environment.

"This is a great event where community leaders and students come together for the betterment of our local waters," Superintendent of School Sandra "Sam" Himmel said. "This is an amazing project. If I could, I would do a cartwheel in this yard."

This school initiative started during the 2014/2015 school year, with students from pre-kindergarten through fifth grade writing letters and drawing pictures urging state legislators to fund a project to clean up the invasive algae known as Lyngbya.

As one of only three National Wildlife Federation Green Flag Award ECO Schools in the state of Florida, Crystal River Primary collaborated with Duke Energy and the nonprofit group Save Crystal River Inc. in December to build Rock Star eelgrass nurseries in every classroom, using sand and water from the river.

"We did a lot of experimenting with variables, with the top on and the top off, the north or the south side of the building and they grew the best in the classroom because of the sunlight," said Crystal River Primary Principal Donnie Brown.

At Friday's event, students broke into groups to not only work but to celebrate their successful year of growing nearly 7.2 pounds of eelgrass, with second-graders at the school growing the most.

"This thing is called 'Be a Star — Grow Eelgrass,' and you are the rock stars for making this happen this year, by learning about a healthy spring shed and how you can save and restore Crystal River and King's Bay," said Dorothy Pernu, Duke Energy community relations manager.

Students got to plant eelgrass thanks to Duke Energy's Crystal River Mariculture Center, learned from Gator Dredging how boat anchors damage seagrass beds and took a closer look at eelgrass through a microscope.

Among the first group of students to enter the water to plant eelgrass, Dustin Dewey couldn't contain his excitement.

"The water feels perfect," Dewey said. "My shoes are completely soaked and a bit muddy."

At the end of the day, nearly 1,400 plants were planted in the water bottom, with hopes of the restoring a healthy ecosystem.

"We want to continue this next year, that way we are sustaining it. It's not just one group of kids who have a vested interest in preserving the river, it's every class that comes to our school," Principal Brown said.

Lisa Moore, president of Save Crystal River Inc., also commended the initiative.

"This whole community has come together, and that is the best thing about this event. We feel if we teach the kids now they are going to keep it this way because they are going to care. We are already getting calls from other schools. Pleasant Grove Elementary is doing this next year, and students want to study eelgrass for science projects. It is going full circle."

The sponsors who made the day a success were Duke Energy, Save Crystal River, Gator Dredging, Manatee Tour and Dive, Sea & Shoreline, Manatee Eco-Tourism Association (META), M&B Dairy and Mike Scott Plumbing.