

Student Journalists Learn About Invasive Species

by Karen Brown

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On a hot, humid June morning in Gainesville, Florida, sixty eager high-school journalism students descended on Lake Alice at the University of Florida to learn about invasive species. The combination Role Models Foundation event and UF College of Journalism recruiting activity challenged students to a morning of gathering facts from invasive species scientists at the lake and an afternoon of producing a final news piece. Students were accompanied by professional journalists, UF College of Journalism professors, and graduate and undergraduate students. All seemed excited by the topic of the day, the chance to visit Lake Alice and the opportunity to interview scientists from UF. A special treat for all was an airboat tour of the lake which most had never experienced.

The Role Model Foundation is a non-profit organization dedicated to educational programs for young people, especially those who experience barriers, which dedicates itself to developing journalists and involved citizens. Rolemodelstoday.org is an online publication that publishes upbeat articles by youth and for youth. It gives aspiring journalists an opportunity to present high-interest stories and share vital information about life. Related activities include mentoring, internship and networking opportunities with professional journalists, business partners and educators. The publication promotes citizenship, character and personal responsibility through highlighting role models. All students are invited to submit articles for possible publication. The Role Model Foundation was founded by respected journalist, Mr. Bill Maxwell.

Visit the website at: www.rolemodelstoday.org

Lake Alice receives high levels of nutrients from the UF campus and historically has had a problem with aquatic weeds as a result. The problem was tackled with aquatic weed harvesters, grass carp, and herbicides and eventually was brought under a maintenance control program which now keeps the lake an attractive place to visit and an opportune site to view a large population of alligators, turtles and birds.

Students and their parents were given a brief overview to invasive species issues in Florida prior to visiting the lake. The news gathering portion of the day featured University of Florida personnel. Ms. Margaret Glenn drove an aquatic weed harvester while Dr. William Haller explained the pros and cons of mechanical control activities. Dr. Jim Cuda discussed biological control methods using insects; Dr. Steve Johnson explained problems with invasive animals and provided numerous preserved and skeletal specimens; Dr. Colette Jacono exhibited invasive plants; and Dr. Mike Netherland discussed invasive plant control methods using herbicides. Mr. Ed Hayes with the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission took students on an airboat tour of the lake and described past aquatic weed problems and pointed out growing tussock (floating island) formations. Ms. Amy Richard helped coordinate the event and kept students moving between stations. She later surprised them with a visit by *Amelia exotica floridana* (Amy in plant costume) during the afternoon work session. Drs. Ken Langeland and Jeffrey Hutchinson also provided post-field trip expertise to students during the afternoon session.

Everyone enjoyed the busy day and learned from one another. Presenters were inspired by the enthusiasm and maturity of the students and, hopefully, the students were inspired to look beneath the surface of complex issues such as invasive species and their management in their future journalistic endeavors.

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