

# Able Otter Teaches Kids to Nurture Nature

by Carla Ulakovic

Since 1958, the East County Water Control District (ECWCD) has been dedicated to preserving and protecting water resources in Lehigh Acres (eastern Lee County) and western Hendry County, Florida. ECWCD recently designed its first public outreach program with education grants from the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council's 2009 Kathy Craddock Burks Education and Outreach Grant (\$1,000), the Charlotte Harbor National Estuary Program (CHNEP) Public Outreach Grant (\$3,000), and a donation from Tetra Tech, Inc. (\$500).



ECWCD created a branded program, *Nurture Nature—Save the Source!*, including an original mascot, Able Otter, to create a trustworthy and recognizable message to help raise awareness and inspire kids to become good stewards for the natural environment.

As part of the multi-tiered pilot outreach program, *Nurture Nature—Save the Source!*, ECWCD educated and energized more than 900 first through fifth grade students at Harns Marsh Elementary School about the water cycle, the watershed, personal actions that pollute and stress the environment, the benefits of native plants, the impacts of invasive plants, and best-practice solutions.

ECWCD invited several schools in the local community to participate in the *Nurture Nature—Save the Source!* program with the hope of educating at least 800 students. An eager partner was found at Harns Marsh Elementary School (HME) in Assistant Principal, Marsha Bur. HME and ECWCD coordinated two full educational days at the school. Teachers incorporated the *Able Otter Nurture Nature* activity booklet into their lesson plans prior to the school events. The *Nurture Nature — Save the Source* activity booklet teaches kids about storm water management, the benefits of native plants and other key issues in the natural environment of southwest Florida. Classrooms were invited, two at a time, to participate in a thirty minute educational activity which utilized a table-top model of the natural landscape to demonstrate the role water plays in the environment and ways in which pollution affects our waters. Students then participated in the Nurture Nature Planting Station where they were taught about the benefits of xeriscaping and were able to transplant a native dune sunflower to take home for a butterfly garden. Each classroom had time to visit with Able Otter and have a class photo taken. After the

educational day, students were asked to take a pledge to become stewards of the environment by joining Able Otter's River Romp Rangers, and were given a certificate.

Three classes from each grade level, first through fifth, were given pre- and post-program quizzes to gauge awareness levels. The first quiz was administered before students participated in the environmental education event in order to create a benchmark of awareness. The pre- and post-program quizzes showed a 34 percent increase in student awareness on the subjects of stormwater management, the benefits of native plants, water conservation, and pollution prevention practices. The student in each grade level who showed the most improvement after the program and those who received the highest scores on the quizzes will be receiving an Able Otter stuffed animal.

Due to the success of the two-day in-school program, ECWCD coordinated a separate event for the entire HME fifth grade level to experience the natural environment. ECWCD reached out to several local environmental groups to also participate in the field day. Approximately 150 students enjoyed a special field day at Harns Marsh – a district-owned, 578-acre preserve. Students learned how they could nurture nature as they went on a one-hour guided nature walk through Harns Marsh, planted native laurel oaks and red maples in the South Marsh, and heard educational presentations from the ECWCD, CHNEP, the Calusa Nature Center-Planetarium, the Conservancy of Southwest Florida, and Lee County Mosquito Control.

Teachers were surveyed at the two-day in-school program and at the field day. Ninety percent thought the model presentation was engaging; 95 percent strongly agreed they would participate in future programs; 85 percent found the information relevant to



PHOTOS BY CARLA ULAKOVIC  
ECWCD staff member, Hugo Villafuerte, helps students transplant native dune sunflowers.

# — Save the Source!



Jennifer Snekszer's second grade class poses for a class picture with Able Otter after their visit to the Nurture Nature Planting Station.



their grade level; 90 percent strongly agreed that the activity book was a useful tool; and 100 percent of the fifth grade teachers strongly agreed that the field day was a great interactive learning tool.

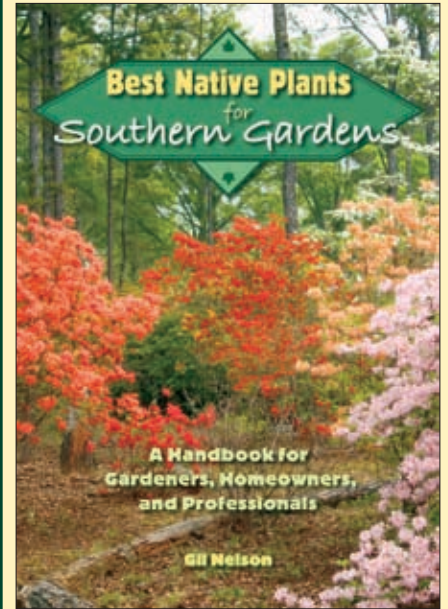
"The *Nurture Nature—Save the Source!* pilot program has been a wonderful experience from planning to implementation," says Dave Lindsay, ECWCD District Manager. "When Able Otter walks into the room, you can really see the joy on a child's face. He helps children, parents and community members get excited about the program and makes the message more memorable."

Able Otter is becoming a bit of a celebrity as he has received several invitations to attend local community events. In the past year, he has made appearances at the FLEPPC Annual Conference in Crystal River, several ECWCD Ribbon Cutting Ceremonies and the Lehigh Acres Spring Festival where he was recognized by children from HME. A limited number of Able Otter stuffed animals were produced as incentives for the Nurture Nature Program courtesy of Tetra Tech, Inc.

ECWCD received wonderful support from FLEPPC, CHNEP, HME and the community for the *Nurture Nature—Save the Source!* program. ECWCD will continue to research and develop ways to improve this program. We plan to continue our partnership with HME and hope to fill requests for presentations as they are received.

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