

Students Tackle Invasive Plants with Help of FLEPPC Grant by Jean Annucci

Invasive exotic plants are a growing dilemma for environmental managers throughout the United States. Here in Florida's warm, plant-friendly tropical climate, the challenge of controlling invasive plants can be overwhelming, with some invasive plants seeming to grow almost before your eyes. As part of their long-term strategy, stewardship managers at the Guana Tolomato Matanzas National Estuarine Research Reserve (GTM NERR) in St. Johns County are involving the next generation of environmentalists in a program designed to quash the spread of nuisance plants.

In 2010, the non-profit group "Friends of GTM Reserve" received a Kathy Craddock Burks Education Grant from the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council (FLEPPC). The award enabled GTM NERR to bring students from the Jacksonville branch of the Student Conservation Association (SCA) to St. Johns County in order to eradicate invasive plants common to northeast Florida. GTM NERR's Stewardship Coordinator Forrest Penny says, "The FLEPPC grant to our Friends organization was invaluable this summer. With many organizations strapped for funds, the Friends used grant funds to help SCA transport their student crew to St. Johns County to give us a boost with our eradication program." He added that the grant also paid for the loppers that SCA members used in the field, as well as gloves and other important safety gear. The tools and supplies will be reused by GTM NERR volunteers throughout the year in other eradication projects.

Laboring for hours in the sun in a dense thicket of plants, fighting an onslaught of insects and occasional encounters with snakes is not the summer pastime a typical teenager would choose. SCA participants, however, were willing to volunteer for the job. Before beginning their campaign against invasive plants, the Jacksonville Community Crew of students took a short "101" course on natural Florida habitats, and learned how invasive plants can crowd out native plants upon which local wildlife depend for food and refuge. They learned how to identify plants that are a problem locally, the techniques used to eradicate specific plant species, and safety precautions to follow



SCA crew members use loppers and safety gear purchased with funds from a Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council grant.

while in the field. Then came days of hard work at several coastal locations where invasive plants were overtaking the natural environment. The result of their 2010 field work was six acres of coastal and estuarine habitat cleared of Brazilian pepper (*Schinus terebinthifolius*), Chinese tallow (*Sapium sebiferum*), air potato (*Dioscorea bulbifera*), asparagus "fern" (*Asparagus aethiopicus*), tuberous sword fern (*Nephrolepis cordifolia*), and arrowhead vine (*Syngonium podophyllum*).

The SCA project fit perfectly into the workplan of GTM NERR's Invasive Plant Eradication Task Force, coordinated by Park Specialist Gary Swenk. The task force targets invasive species found on public and private properties. Under Swenk's direction, the "Pepper Busters," as the volunteer-driven teams have become known, devote two days per week during the cooler months to cutting, treating, and disposing of invasive plants threatening to destroy fragile Florida coastal habitat. Of the SCA Community Crew of 12 students, Swenk says, "These kids were working in miserable summer weather. It was hot with no breeze, but the kids kept a good attitude and worked steadily. I would definitely work with an SCA crew again." The students' time in St. Johns County was not all work, however. Their project ended with a beach party near the GTM NERR Marine-land research station and a barbecue at the reserve's Environmental Education Center. At the barbecue, each student gave an oral presentation on what they learned through their GTM NERR training and eradication experience.

To learn about the work of the GTM NERR Invasive Plant Eradication Task Force or how to become involved as a "Pepper Buster," contact Gary Swenk or Emily Montgomery at 904-823-4500.

More about the Student Conservation Association

Putting students to work as park volunteers was an idea envisioned by Elizabeth Cushman in 1955 when she was a senior at Vassar College. She founded the SCA and initiated the first two student-run conservation projects in 1957. Today the non-profit program operates in 16 major cities nationwide. Program partners include the National Park Service, The Nature Conservancy, Audubon Society, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and many other state and national conservation-oriented organizations.

Students from communities with an SCA program volunteer to become members of an SCA Community Crew. In some areas, SCA offers a Conservation Leadership Corps program that involves students working on weekends during the school year. In the program, teens learn about the local environment and complete site restoration and trail maintenance projects in area national, regional, and state parks. Students earn a small stipend for their efforts, though the value of their work goes far beyond the small amount they receive.

Most SCA crew members become life-long conservationists, with 70 percent of SCA alumni remaining active as adults in jobs or volunteer activities related to the environment. SCA reports that 12 percent of current National Park Service employees were once enrolled in their program. In the 50-plus years of SCA's existence, more than 50,000 members have provided service valued at over a half-billion dollars. SCA enrollees provide more than two million hours of service annually to natural and cultural sites throughout all 50 states. For more information about the Student Conservation Association, explore their website at www.thesca.org, or contact the Florida program at 904-354-7799.