

# “Do Florida a Favor – Trash the Air potato!”

By Marybeth Soderstrom, Teen Program Coordinator, Camp Fire USA

During the summer of 2010, a dedicated cadre of almost 100 teen volunteers engaged in service-learning projects throughout Florida as part of Camp Fire USA's Youth Volunteer Corps (YVC). The program was funded by a Kathy Craddock Burks education grant from the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council, with additional support from the United Way of Central Florida. The teens completed a total of 2,226 community service-learning hours; approximately 75% of that time was spent removing FLEPPC Category I invasive exotic plants like air potato and Brazilian pepper. After completing so much time in the field, the teens shared their knowledge with children at the Charlotte Harbor Nature Festival through a craft and games.

One of the YVC's continued objectives is to bring a strong environmental education and conservation stewardship component to service-learning. YVC is committed to getting 6<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> graders outdoors to enhance their appreciation for the environment while learning how to protect natural Florida. Through their time spent in the field working with invasive plants, the teens gained a deeper understanding of environmental issues. Even on non-service based outings, it was common to hear “I see air potato!” from the back of the van as we passed it on the roadside. There was a sense of pride that they knew about “real” Florida and the dangers of invasive plants.

The Youth Volunteer Corps is a place for teens to learn about themselves and their community. While it is sometimes challenging for them to think beyond their social life, continued exposure

to the outdoors empowers them to gain a true understanding of the impact that they and others have played in the environment, be it negative or positive. YVC teens become better stewards of the environment and learn to see how their day-to-day choices can affect the environment in a substantial way.

Jamie, 16, writes about the summer of 2010:

*This summer I learned about exotic plants and how to remove them. Our quote this year was “2,010 in 2010.” That meant that the teens in Camp Fire were going to spend 2,010 service hours removing as many invasive exotic plants as they could during the summer of 2010. I believe I removed about six or seven different kinds. The most popular one was air potato. It is harmful to the plants because it suffocates them and kills the plants native to Florida. Camp Fire USA has a fun, educational atmosphere and I enjoy volunteering with them.*

Caleb, 15, writes:

*I went to Charlotte Harbor Nature Festival with Camp Fire USA to inform the community about air potato, an invasive exotic plant. It surprised me when so many visitors said “That’s what’s growing in my back yard!” We played Hot Potato with air potatoes so the kids could learn what they looked like. I had a lot of fun playing with them and making a craft with the kids that said, “Do Florida a favor and trash the air potato.” I found the whole event very educational and incurable fun.*

To learn more about Camp Fire USA or the Youth Volunteer Corps, please visit [www.campfireusa-sunshine.org](http://www.campfireusa-sunshine.org).

## INVADERS! Traveling Trunks By Melissa Cain Nell, Manatee County Natural Resources Department

For an increasing number of schools, field trips to local parks and preserves are difficult to fund and schedule. Yet teachers still recognize the importance of teaching students about Florida's environment and are always looking for ways to incorporate this material into their curriculum. So how can teachers bring nature into the classroom? Manatee County's Natural Resources Department has developed a “traveling trunk” program in order to give teachers and students an opportunity to experience nature within the classroom using an interdisciplinary, hands-on approach. The idea behind the traveling trunk is to create a “nature in a box” experience, where students will be exposed to a diverse array of activities

and materials that follow and support a central theme. Teachers and other educators can check out the trunks for free from the Natural Resources Department and keep them for up to three weeks for use in the classroom.

FLEPPC's Kathy Craddock Burks Education Grant kindly funded two brand new traveling trunks packed with materials about Florida's non-native invasive species. The trunks, titled “INVADERS!,” were designed to help students better understand Florida's invasive species and the negative effects they have on our state's native creatures and habitats. Each trunk, one for K-5 and one for 6-12, also includes a detailed teacher's guide filled with lesson plans which utilize the trunks'



materials. The lesson plans and listing of trunk contents are available online at the FLEPPC website. The Natural Resources Department would like to thank FLEPPC for the grant award which has provided a new and unique way to educate others about Florida's invasive species problems.

Manatee County's “INVADERS!” traveling trunks include lesson plans (all online at [www.fleppc.org/publications.htm](http://www.fleppc.org/publications.htm)), posters, DVDs, board games, mounted species specimens, plant guides, plant presses, brochures, identification flash cards, and other items designed to aid in learning about invasive species. Photo by Melissa Cain Nell, Manatee County Natural Resources Department, [melissa.nell@mymanatee.org](mailto:melissa.nell@mymanatee.org)