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# Nokuse Plantation: Children will 'fall in love with nature'

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September 12, 2009 7:20 PM

Kimberly White  
Daily News

FREEPORT — Nature enthusiasts shrugged off the wet weather Saturday and hit the trail adjacent to the E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center.

About 7 million of longleaf pines would not form a canopy over the trail if not for the efforts of Nokuse Plantation owner M.C. Davis and a team of scientists and volunteers who helped restore the land to its natural state.

Many of those involved in the restoration efforts — as well as its namesake, world-renowned scientist and two-time Pulitzer Prize winner E.O. Wilson — were on hand Saturday as guests strolled through the exhibit hall. Parents snapped photos of their children climbing on the red, larger-than-life Florida harvester ant that greets visitors in the front room.

Nearby, several wall-mounted flat-screen televisions showed a video that describes the history of the 48,000-acre Nokuse Plantation. Nine acres is dedicated to the Biophilia Center, which offers children a chance to learn about the natural world and the importance of biodiversity.

Schoolchildren will be able to explore nature on the hiking trails and in the learning center, which features exhibits ranging from various species of snakes and frogs to Native American tools to an active beehive with tens of thousands of honey bees.

Katie Scally, the 9-year-old daughter of Biophilia Center Director Christina Scally, stood in front of a panel that explained the process of photosynthesis by using a panel of multi-colored lights.

Katie, a fourth-grader at Butler Elementary School, said her class will come to the center once a week for five weeks to learn about photosynthesis, pollination, the importance of prescribed burns and how they all contribute to a healthy ecosystem.

One exhibit at the center allows visitors to step on a series of strips to find out what kinds of sounds different animals make. Another explains the importance of longleaf pine forests, which once dominated Northwest Florida but have largely given way to development.

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And out on the trail system "you learn a lot of really cool things," Katie said

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"There's even a tree where a beaver has chewed off some bark and there's a lot of longleaf pines out there," she added.

"When you walk down the trail, you see something new every time, like a snake, a bird or something like that."

M.C. Davis co-owns Nokuse Plantation with Sam Shine.

The center initially will cater solely to fourth-graders from Walton, Okaloosa and Bay counties. Future curriculums will be created for middle school and high school students.

Although scientists can meet and conduct research there, Davis said the center is geared toward children.

"The main purpose is to get children to fall in love with nature and develop a little bit of a naturalist in them, and be able to implement that in the rest of their lives," said Christina Scally.

They will be able to observe animals and plants along the nearly one-mile trail, part of which consists of a wooden boardwalk that crosses a wetland. Several crayfish traps hang from the posts that children can pull them up and identify the animals caught before letting them go, Scally said.

At the end of the trail is a screened-in, solar-powered barn where she said students can plug their computers into outlets and type their notes for the day.

The center also features a 165-seat theater, several classrooms and a lab station, all geared toward students.

Scally said the center is affiliated with the Chipley-based Panhandle Area Education Consortium, which represents 17 counties in Northwest Florida. The consortium has its own television channel and can send and receive broadcasts to the center.

During a late-afternoon presentation, Dr. Matt Aresco, Nokuse Plantation's director, showed a slideshow about the plantation's activities, goals and achievements.

The plantation, he said, is home to 39 rare species, including reptiles, mammals, birds and insects. Conservation is of the utmost importance "so we can pass this torch on to the next generation."

"Giving young people the chance to experience and explore nature, we hope, will inspire them to continue our efforts to protect in the future," he said.

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**skipam** wrote:

Ah! Way cool!  
Mr. Davis is my neighbor. I say that, but he lives 2 miles up the road. We're all 'in the neighborhood' here. I saw a hog along the road yesterday near his drive. Good thing it's not hunting season yet. ;) (Just kidding)  
One thing I know and appreciate, is the fact that part of this 48,000 acres is right behind my house. And to me, that means these (planted) long-leaf pines won't be cleared for development!



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