

# Conservation center now open to the public

By Matt Brown

*Beacon Correspondent*

The E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center in Freeport opened its doors to the public Friday, June 3.

The privately operated environmental facility is located off Highway 20, on the 48,000-acre Nokuse Plantation. The plantation is a conservation project that specializes in the environmental education and awareness of students. The facility offers an extensive nature trail that features natural woodlands that are undergoing ecological restoration. There are also interactive exhibits that help explore nature.

The Biophilia Center is considered a "hot-spot" by many local and regional scientists because of its location in the longleaf pine ecosystem. The ecosystem is known for its diverse collection of plants and animals. This center helps nature lovers of all ages learn the importance of such prac-

tices as conservation, restoration and preservation.

The term "biophilia," means the connections that human beings subconsciously seek with the rest of life. The term was developed by two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning scientist and author Dr. Edward O. Wilson. Wilson, known for his early scientific work in Northwest Florida and Southwest Alabama, is a Pellegrino University Professor Emeritus and honorary curator at Harvard University.

The facility has several classrooms, labs and even an auditorium that can give children the opportunity to learn more about biodiversity of the Nokuse

Plantation. There are outdoor gardens where children can get their hands dirty and learn the importance of vegetation. Laura Sell, a horticulturist for the facility since it was established in 2009, has noticed how different children are

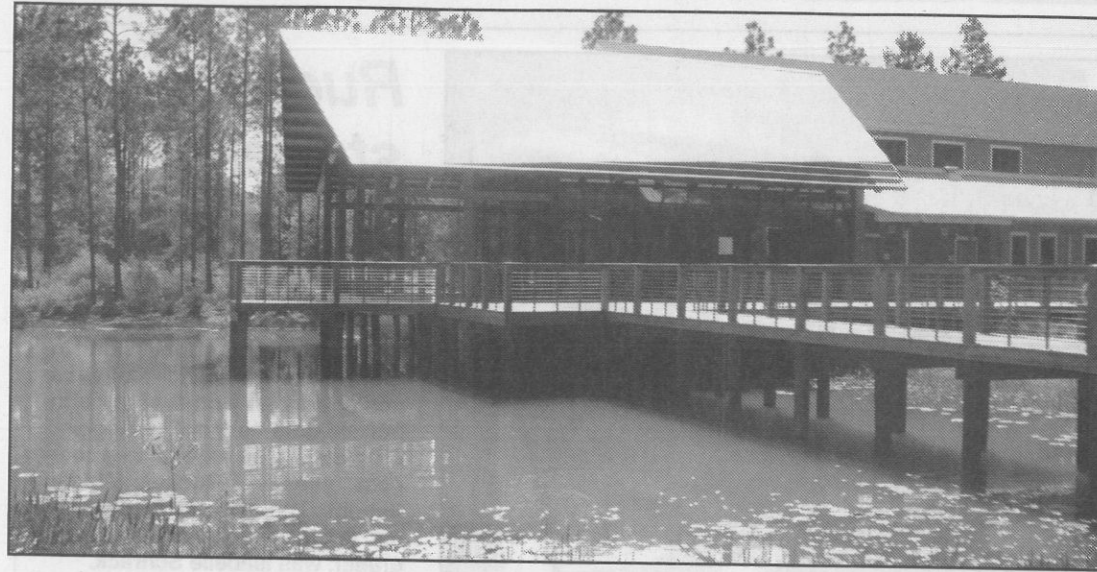


Photo by Matthew Brown

**The exterior of the E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center. The center, located just past Freeport on Highway 20, opened its doors to the public June 3.**

today from when she was around their age.

"Kids for the most part stay inside," said Sell. "When I was their age, I couldn't wait go outside."

Sell stresses the importance of educating children about the envi-

ronment and how important it is to preserve it. She even uses an exhibit at the facility to show as an example. The exhibit shows a map of Destin, before and after the golf courses and strip malls.

"Habitat loss is the biggest threat to biodiversity," said Sell.

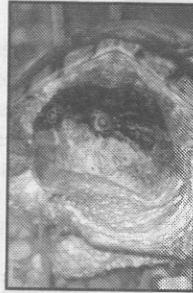
nature. It also explains concerns about the rapidly declining bee population.

Some other live wildlife is inside the facility, such as Igora, a large snapping turtle. Igora was rescued at a young age after losing her front two legs in a raccoon attack. Igora loves attention. The exhibit room also features some live snakes that are native to the area.

"We are excited about the opportunity to attract visitors to the area and share with them the previous features about our area, including its biodiversity in the longleaf pine ecosystem," said facility director Christina Scally, who has been involved with the center since the very beginning.

The Biophilia Center, located on the right side of Highway 20 between Freeport and Bruce, will be open Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays through Aug. 31. From Sept. 1 through May 31, the facility will be open Saturdays.

Call 835-1824 or visit [eowilsoncenter.org/welcome.html](http://eowilsoncenter.org/welcome.html) for more information.



**'Igora,' a rescued snapping turtle, loves attention.**