

Gaetz gets award, first-hand look at Biophilia Center

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Sen. Don Gaetz got a brief peek into the eco-diversity education offered at E. O. Wilson Biophilia Center last week.

The idea of the 48,000-acre facility in Freeport is not to create scientists, founder M.C. Davis explained to Gaetz after watching a short film on the roots of the center, including words from Harrison Ford and its namesake, Wilson.

The educational mission for the center is for students to “feel the awakening of their own biophilia,” Davis said of their efforts to teach conservation, preservation and restoration. “The only way people change their behaviors freely is through education.”

The film told how E.O. Wilson grew up in the woods of southern Alabama and how he came to make a discovery at 13 years old.

While letting ants crawl around on his hand, Wilson told how he stumbled across a non-native fire ant that had no known predators, and could spread rapidly. He alerted the state officials but it was too late. Several years later, the ant is everywhere and is a potential

threat to agriculture. The State of Alabama requested Wilson do a survey of the progression of the ants. His report, published in 1949, was the first scientific

publication of a man often called Dr. Ant.

That discovery paved the way for a lifetime of study that ultimately led to the creation

of the Biophillia Center, which brings in students regularly for field trips. One such group of children met up with the senator during his tour.



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Sen. Don Gaetz sat on replicas of massive ant mounds with Everett Brown Middle School students to get their take on the Biophilia experience. **LEFT**, Alicia Braggs (Front) and Megan Rivera and Devon Bledsoe (R) show their approval and excitement for the hands-on program (and The Sun’s presence.) For more photos of the tour, see waltonsun.com



Gaetz joined the students perched on giant ant mounds for a conversation.

“What Davis has done here is a national treasure,” Gaetz said. “One hour or day here is worth a week in the classroom. Thank goodness young people get to see this; not as a tourist, but to touch and feel it.”

Gaetz asked many questions during his first visit to Nokuse Plantation, starting with accessibility.

“We do have students in wheelchairs that participate,” said Director Cristy Scally, as she explained the outdoor portion of the program.

The day’s highlight came when Scally presented the former Okaloosa County School Board Member with an award in partnership with Panhandle Area Education Consortium. The award paid tribute to Gaetz’s “support of educational programs and the children of Northwest Florida.”

“Our mission is to train teachers and improve instruction around the world, and when they built this and bring in a Noble Prize winner to address 30 teachers, it can reach all around the world,” said Pat McDaniel, director for Chipley based education broadcasting organization PAEC.