

FKCC Environmental Club Celebrates Earth Week



FKCC Environmental Club students pose after cleaning the area surrounding White Street Pier.

KEY WEST, FL, April 14, 2011—Earth Day isn't enough for the students of the Florida Keys Community College Environmental Club. In fact, the jam-packed week of free and fun eco-centered educational programs they've planned for the week leading up to Earth Day isn't enough for these passionate students. Their mission to celebrate and advocate for the environment is a year-round dedication. But right now, their focus is on the first annual "Earth Week," April 18-22. The activities, which are open to the community, include daily guest lecturers in the college library; TED Talks presentations; promotion of green-living tips; a commemoration of the Deepwater Horizon explosion on Smathers Beach; and a live concert by the band "The Skank with Con Leche" in the FKCC amphitheatre.

At their last meeting, fittingly held at the college's Clark Maxwell Marine Environmental Habitat and Observatory, the increasingly-active club debated how they were going to schedule a clean-up project amid the students' varying intense schedules during final exams week. The solution: two clean up events, so everyone could participate. For the past two years, the club has committed to one major weekend clean-up project per month, which has resulted in the removal of literally tons of trash and recyclables from various mangroves, shorelines, and roadways throughout the Keys. With each labor of love project, they've contributed to creating a more beautiful and healthy ecosystem.

The last area they tackled was a known eyesore: the waterfront of Safe Harbor Marina in Stock Island. According to Marine Environmental Technology student and club vice president Kara

Schlieman, “It was horribly dirty. We picked up all sorts of junk and even found a bike... but it was awesome, and afterward the Hogfish gave us free, yummy appetizers.”

The employees of the nearby restaurant aren't the only ones to recognize these eco-warriors. They are garnering more and more community attention, including support from organizations like Green Living and Energy Education (GLEE), Reef Relief, Oceana, the SCUBAnauts and the Key West Tropical Forest and Botanical Garden—not to mention passers-by.

“We bring a sign to our clean-ups now, so people honk their horns and shout ‘thank you’ to us. It feels good that we’re setting an example,” boasted Environmental Club president Joshua Arbogast, who is studying to be a marine biologist with plans to further his studies at the University of Hawaii or Nova Southeastern University.

Earlier this month, the group turned attention to the Florida Keys Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (FKSPCA) after Arbogast adopted a dog from the neighboring Stock Island animal shelter. They delivered a bounty of pet products and donations they collected from a college-wide supply drive. As if that weren't enough, they tidied, scrubbed and landscaped the facility before grooming and playing with some of the grateful furry tenants.

In addition to clean-up events, the group participates in environmental advocacy and activities to promote sustainability. They began working closely with GLEE on expositions and projects a year ago. The relationship developed with the local non-profit organization led to a free energy audit of the college, which has resulted in substantial energy and costs savings. GLEE, along with local environmentalist Erika Biddle, plans to help the Environmental Club and students from the college's Environmental Biology classes and the Keys Center Academy plant an organic garden on the Key West Campus in the fall.

“I'm so proud of these students,” said Melissa Nicholas, Environmental Club advisor and Reading Instructor. “With each activity, they are building leadership skills and qualities that will help them thrive beyond college.”

In January, four club representatives headed north to Weston, Florida to attend the 26th Annual Everglades Coalition Conference. The students were among 53 local, state and national conservation and environmental organizations there to discuss strategies to protect and restore the natural resources of the greater Everglades. U.S. Senator Bill Nelson and former U.S. Senator and Florida Governor Bob Graham even lent their ears to the group to discuss their desires for global environmental policy.

“We had the opportunity to learn more about what impacts the Everglades' delicate ecosystem and we were exposed to the behind-the-scenes work of developing conservation and protection policies,” said club secretary Meagan Morrison, obviously still exhilarated from the experience. She is working toward an Associate in Science in Marine Environmental Technology, her second degree from FKCC.

“We were the only college student group in attendance; everyone was really encouraged and happy to see the next generation represented.”

Indeed, with the impact they've made thus far and their spirited plans for the future, the students of the FKCC Environmental Club are leading the next generation of environment stewards and inspiring and motivating many others along the way.

A full schedule of Earth Week events can be viewed at www.fkcc.edu. For more information about or to learn ways to support the FKCC Environmental Club, email: melissa.nicholas@fkcc.edu.

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