

Students dedicate their spring break to our help our environment



STUART — Recently, a group of students from George Mason University in Washington D.C. volunteered their spring break to help our estuary by building an oyster reef as part of the Oyster Reef Restoration Project.

Through the alternative spring break program, small groups of George Mason students travel to locations in the United States to participate in numerous service-oriented projects. “Martin County has been hosting our alternative spring break program for several years. We enjoy coming here and making a difference for the environment,” said Charles Coats, Alternative Spring Break Site Leader.

During their break, students filled over two hundred bags with 20-30 pounds of oyster cultch (fossilized shell and limestone rock, which are hard materials designed to provide points of attachment for oysters) and deposited the bags into river at Flagler Park.

The oyster bagging event is part of the nearshore component of the Oyster Reef Restoration Project in collaboration with Florida Oceanographic Society. This phase of the project entails collecting used oyster, clam and mussel shells from local restaurants which will be bagged by volunteers and used to create inshore oyster reefs. New mangrove and other suitable shoreline plantings will also be placed inshore of some of the restored reefs, reducing shoreline erosion and resulting in less sediment deposits in the estuaries.

The public is invited to participate in the following Oyster Reef Restoration events:

Oyster Bagging: April 16 & April 30, 9 a.m. at Britt Point located on the North side of the old Roosevelt Bridge.

Oyster Deployment: May 14, 9 a.m., at Flagler Park in Stuart.

About the Oyster Reef Restoration Project

The Oyster Reef Restoration Project involves the placement of approximately 30 million pounds of cultch within the St. Lucie Estuary and the Northwest Fork of the Loxahatchee River to provide critically needed habitat so that oysters can repopulate the estuaries.

Oyster habitat is crucial to the health of our estuaries, effectively filtering nutrients, fine sediments and toxins from the water. Just one adult oyster can filter between 20 and 50 gallons of water per day. The newly constructed reef habitat, when fully populated with oysters, could filter an amount equal to the total volume of the St Lucie Estuary in about a month.

Oyster reefs also provide essential habitat structure for many other forms of marine life including shrimp, clams, crabs, snails and a variety of recreationally important fish such as gag grouper, gray snapper, redfish, and sheepshead.

An educational Web site has been created to keep the public informed and updated on the progress of the restoration efforts. <http://www.oysterrestoration.com>

For more information, contact The Oyster Reef Restoration Hotline at 772-221-1387.

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