

Grant helps Deering Estate at Cutler promote ecology education in schools

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Deering Estate at Cutler will send its Eco-Academy into Miami-Dade and Broward county schools this fall thanks to help from a major car company -- and the sacrifice of some sea horses.

More on the valiant sea horses later, but with a \$32,500 grant from Ford Motor Co., the Deering Foundation's Schoolyard Science Program is able to empower its Eco-Brigade staff of naturalists to bring Eco-Academy into 10 schools starting in September.

Students, up to 30 at a time, at schools ranging from Westminster Christian in Palmetto Bay to Miami Shores Elementary and New River Middle School in Fort Lauderdale will see mobile marine and archaeological eco-systems.

Deering, a 444-acre natural preserve lapped by the waters of Biscayne Bay in Palmetto Bay, has a 50-gallon touch tank stocked by its marine education department.

The tank contains critters like crabs, sea cucumbers and sea horses. A mobile archaeological lab features fossils, artifacts and tools.

The Ford grant "basically provides the infrastructure to build this mobile classroom; it lets us reach out to schools that, for liability or financial reasons, can't come out to our estate so we can transport our program," says Mary Pettit, executive director of the Deering Estate Foundation.

"More and more budgets get cut, [but] kids get academic enrichment that these hands-on activities provide," Pettit says. "They are able to retain the information much more than through lectures and textbooks. That's the beauty of the program."

A goal is to show grade-school students how nature thrives and that what we do outside can affect the fragile life in our bays and seas, says Jennifer Tisthammer, Deering's exhibits and collections manager.

Similarly, the traveling archaeology forensics unit, the Tekesta Trekker, aims to show students that clues from ancient artifacts can be extrapolated to learn about a particular culture.

Think of a modern-day junk drawer. Root through it. "You'd be surprised what people can tell about you from that junk drawer," Tisthammer says.

Relics from the past, like limestone and pottery, can reveal how South Floridians 10,000 years ago dealt in commerce, for example.

And now, back to the sea horses' sacrifice.

Deering's marine staff has a permit to capture sea life and associated specimens in its mobile touch tanks for up to three weeks for the purpose of education and study. Deering errs on the conservative side and releases the critters back into the bay in 10 to 14 days, Tisthammer says.

“So they don't become pets," she adds. “We don't want them domesticated to that safe environment.”

One thing: The crabs wind up eating the sea horses. But, as she notes, that's how it goes for the circle of life in the actual marine environment, too.

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