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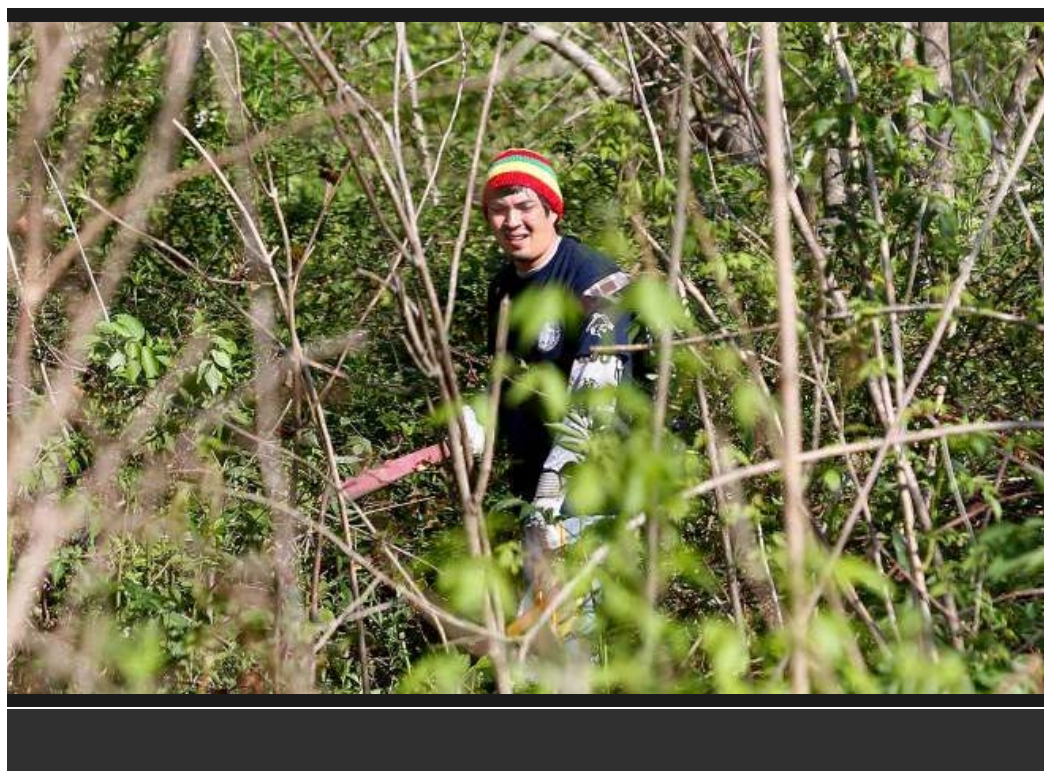
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NEWORLEANS

SEARCH

California college students delve into wetlands conservation



by kari dequine harden
New Orleans bureau
March 25, 2013

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BELLE CHASSE — As the Gulf of Mexico creeps closer and closer to New Orleans, the forested wetlands in between provides a crucial storm buffer between open water and the city.

The Woodlands Trail in Belle Chasse will be one of the largest such protective wooded areas left in the next 35 to 50 years, Katie Brasted, executive director of the Woodlands Conservancy, said.

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And it is precisely that peaceful park, located next to English Turn, that Sean Anderson and his college students have come to from California for the past six years to help save.

An associate professor of environmental science and resource management, Anderson, and Oregon State University associate professor of horticulture John Lambrinos, started bringing students to New Orleans in 2007.

The annual trip is part of a service learning class at California State University Channel Islands devoted entirely to the multitude of social, political and environmental issues surrounding the rebuilding of the region after Hurricane Katrina.

Part of the trip always includes multiple days trekking through the forest at Woodlands, collecting data and documenting invasive species so that the area, faced by increasingly frequent and damaging storm events, can be restored and conserved.

Throughout last week, the team of 12 undergraduate students and one Oregon graduate student mapped out plots, counted and identified plants and measured how well the targeted treatment of invasive species is working.

“There are so many reasons to save this land,” Anderson said, calling it an “energy sponge” for both wind and water. Brasted said the area is also a vital habitat for more than 165 species of migratory birds.

The 35- to 50-year prediction is “incredibly conservative” in terms of looming land loss, Anderson said. “It’s more on the 30 side.”

Fighting sea level rise and subsidence, the rates of change are happening faster than initially thought, he said.

Each year it’s Anderson’s goal for the students to listen, learn and embed themselves into the culture. There’s no pity in their mission, he said. And there’s nothing in the classroom, or in California, that can replace the hands-on experiential learning that happens during the spring break trip.

The students’ schedule is a busy one. Over 11 days, daylight is spent getting dirty working on community garden and wetland restoration projects. Nights are spent at seafood boils in the bayou, dancing in Frenchmen Street venues, bowling to Zydeco music and visiting with chefs, writers, and other local luminaries, including Kermit Ruffins, Harry Shearer, Irvin Mayfield, Mark Schleifstein, Paul Sanchez, and Ivor van Heerdan.

They also take a failed levee tour with Tulane Professor Steve Nelson, seeing firsthand where, why and to what extent the different parts of the city flooded, as well as the repairs and improvements made since Katrina.

The Deepwater Horizon disaster has also been incorporated into the curriculum, with a visit this year to the courtroom to watch part of the BP trial.

Service learning is a major component at CSU Channel Islands, the system’s newest school where a majority of the students are first-generation college students, Anderson said. The trip is only possible

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through the assistance of school funds, which provide about two thirds of the cost while the students contribute the remainder.

Right after Katrina, Anderson said he threw out his lesson plans and began teaching a class about issues surrounding the storm. His students wanted to do something more, but Anderson told them that the best they could do at the time was raise money. They raised \$24,000 and donated it to the Red Cross.

Anderson said his students then said, "OK, we did that — now take us there." Anderson and Lambrinos took an exploratory trip in 2006.

The first few years they spent most of their days gutting houses — trying to address whatever needs were most immediate. But then by a stroke of luck, they were seeking someone who needed help and got hooked up with Brasted and Woodlands.

Brasted needed an invasive species assessment done to get \$40,000 in FEMA money to begin clearing the trails. It was purely by coincidence that the skills required were Anderson and Lambrinos' areas of expertise.

The primary invasive species are Chinese Tallow, Chinaberry, and Chinese Privet, which can inhibit the regrowth of native vegetation. While the species typically stay on the edge of the forest, Anderson said that Katrina and subsequent storms spread the invasive plants further into the forest.

Lambrinos said that unfortunately, they aren't seeing much improvement in the health of the forest. The canopy is increasingly open, and the invasive species recover more quickly than native ones after the number of storms that have hit since they first saw the area in 2007.

With each storm, the older trees take a beating, he said, pointing to old cypress trees on the verge of collapse. On the positive side, Lambrinos said that they are seeing encouraging results of the herbicides being used to target the unwanted species.

This year, Hurricane Isaac is part of the curriculum.

In January, the nonprofit Woodlands Conservancy purchased an additional 190 acres of bottomland hardwood wetlands in Lower Coast Algiers, adjacent to the trails. The acquisition from the Archdiocese of New Orleans will now ensure the conservation of the land and wildlife habitat.

Anderson said that while he has worked on restoration projects all over the world, the wetlands require the most sophisticated type of restoration, and it is a science that still has a long way to go. But even if experiments fail, Anderson said, that's fine as long as something is learned in the process.

The long-term monitoring will help discover how to more effectively and cost-efficiently restore the land, he said. The Woodland Trails are an ideal location: close enough to the Gulf without being too close, he said. And it incorporates both Plaquemines and Orleans Parishes.

In addition to the restoration work, the students also contribute to fresh and sustainable food projects. They spent one day learning about New Orleans culture and history through food, starting with a trip to the

farmer's market, followed by cooking lessons. Throughout the week they also worked in the garden at Café Hope, a community garden in Buras, and at Grow Dat Youth Farm.

Early in the week, the consensus of Anderson's students was that they were more than happy to put in the hard work and were thoroughly enjoying getting to know a culture and community very different than southern California.

"Everyone we meet is insanely nice, and interested in what we are doing," student Peter Vegos said. They are also very grateful, Vegos said.

They said they were extremely appreciative that their school helped fund the trip and that they never would have been able to get the same learning experience in the classroom. And without Anderson's inside knowledge and packed week of activities, people and projects, they said they never would have the opportunity for the all-embracing insight into the city and surrounding area.

As the students prepared to return to California on Sunday, Anderson said he and Lambrinos will stay on for a few extra days, continuing assessments of the conservancy's new acreage, as well as doing research as part of a national team looking into the ecotoxicology of the Deepwater Horizon spill.

Anderson said he is always looking for ways to make sure the program — both the student trip and the monitoring of the Woodlands — gets the necessary funding and continues, as well as ways to expand the educational opportunities to other universities.

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