



ALGIERS ACCENT

Cory Turner

Volunteers help bring forest back to life

It all started in 2007, after a fateful call to Executive Director of The Woodlands Conservancy Katie Brasted from Brenda Puckett of Hands of Hope in Belle Chasse. Puckett was coordinating volunteer efforts and was looking for some work for a visiting group to participate in.

The group, led by Sean Anderson from California State University Channel Islands, was in town during spring break to help the area rebuild after Hurricane Katrina.

The only need Brasted had, at the time, was for an assessment of invasive species of plants that started taking over the forested area at the Woodlands Trail after the hurricane decimated the old growth canopy. Though there was a property assessment before the storm, to even apply for grants to restore the forest, there had to be a post-storm assessment and Brasted had no resources for this project.

Brasted said that, after Hurricane Katrina, the previously dense forest looked more like a field of toothpicks, leading to conditions that were welcoming to

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Area also provides hurricane protection

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tallow and other invasive species that would prevent the recovery of the area's ecosystem.

This project was actually a perfect match for Anderson, who serves as an associate professor of the college's Environmental Science and Resources Management program. The visiting group immediately started the process of assessing the storm's damage and its after-effects.

Since the first visit, Anderson has taken numerous trips to the area to work on the project, along with bringing service learning students each year to continue studies.

Anderson says that the forest is one of the largest forested landscapes between the Gulf of Mexico and the city of New Orleans. The forest provides a storm buffer for the city; but, unfortunately, tallow does very little to act as a defense, which is why restoration is so important.

In addition to offering protection for the human residents of the area, the forest also offers refuge to birds as they return from their southern migration. Nearly 30 percent to 40 percent of all migratory species visit the habitat. Unfortunately, a jungle of invasive species does not offer the same quality of shelter or food a native hardwood forest would offer, increasing mortality rates.

Since Anderson's first visit, the group, along with collaborators with the University of California San Diego, Loyola Marymount University, and Oregon State University, has implemented projects to eliminate invasive species and to replant and nurture native cypress growth.

The project has evolved over time and has become a model to study best practices in

reforestation. During this year's spring break, visiting students were assessing the results of remediation work previously done through their project. In addition, they were gathering the results of different planting strategies.

The costs for the trips have been paid, mostly, by California State University Channel Island, with only one third of the cost being contributed by the participating students. Most of the other costs are covered by the university and its collaborators.

While in Louisiana, Anderson tries to give the students a full picture of the area and its culture. The group also works with food gardens in Plaquemines Parish, with Café Hope in Marrero, and with the Grow Dat Youth Farm in New Orleans. He also introduces students to the area's music and musicians.

Anderson and Brasted both have a goal of training local residents to take over the work they have begun, thus impacting the local work force. Additionally, they want to build a local capacity for replicating work in other areas of the country, but there is much work left here to accomplish first.

Recently, the Woodlands Conservancy added 190 acres in Orleans Parish to their tract. During the students' latest visit, a group was tasked with assessing that property for the first time. The results of that assessment will guide future work needed there.

For more information on the Woodlands Conservancy, visit www.woodlandsconservancy.org or call 504.433.4000.

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