

Alabama students help restore hurricane-damaged coastline

by AP-News

MONTGOMERY, Ala. — Students are helping to restore the hurricane-ravaged Alabama coastline by growing beach grasses in their classrooms and then hitting the dunes to plant them.

The Grasses and Classes program, similar to ones in Florida and Maryland, sends more than 1,000 Montgomery County students to Bon Secour Wildlife Refuge each year. They have planted nearly 20,000 plants and helped restore four miles of coastline since Hurricane Ivan hit in 2004.

"We're going green," said Emily Steadham, 15, as she juggled several plastic containers of grasses while she and her classmates divided into teams and dug holes with their hands or shovels to plant sea oats and panicum grass at Bon Secour.

"It's work, but it's for the environment," added 15-year-old Jessica Walker.

The students are helping to restore shoreline vegetation that has been destroyed by decades of storms and waterfront development. Wetland vegetation acts as a natural filter that removes impurities from coastal waters and serves as a spawning, nursery and shelter area for various species of wildlife. The dune plants provide reinforcement to prevent erosion.

The nurseries at each of the seven Alabama schools in the program specialize in plants for a specific environment. In addition to the sea oats and bitter panicum grass, which are good for dunes, some grow salt marsh plants, like smooth cordgrass and black needle rush, while others grow plants suited to freshwater submerged and emergent habitats, like tapegrass, pickerelweed and hard stem bulrush.

"Plants are nature's sand fencing," said Bon Secour manager Jereme Phillips.

Martha Garcia, an environmental scientist with Tampa Bay Watch in Florida, which has had a Grasses in Classes program since 1995, said that without coastal restoration projects, there would be less of a buffer against the damaging effects of storms and hurricanes, more shoreline would erode, water quality would decline and valuable wildlife habitats would be lost, harming tourism and fishing industries.

She said the more that 3,000 students a year in her program are motivated to participate when they can see they're making a difference.

"We want them to have ownership of the plants so they can go out to the restoration site and say, 'I planted those plants,'" she said.

Maryland also has a school-based program that has worked to restore the Chesapeake Bay since 1998.

The Alabama, Florida and Maryland programs, which have no official link to each other, are funded by local, state and federal grants that provide the schools with the equipment and instructions to grow the plants in school nurseries.

At Bon Secour, students only plant their grasses in public areas they'll be able to revisit later, said science teacher Margaret Sedleky, who helped start the program in January 2005 in Hurricane Ivan's wake.

"We wanted to get kids involved to develop a stewardship ethic," she said.

By Kate Brumback, Associated Press Writer

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