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CRPS students plant eelgrass, save Kings Bay in process

By Aidan Bush Chronicle Reporter
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Fifth-graders from Crystal River Primary School pose for a photo with Sarena Stremplewski, front left, and Ann Marczynski, front right, who are dressed as mermaids and represent Mertailor's Mermaid Aquarium Encounter in Lecanto. The two ladies assisted the students Wednesday by handing out Rock Star eelgrass the students will transplant into King's Bay. In addition to transplanting the grass, the students visited several educational exhibits around Hunter Springs Park learning about ecology and protecting the environment.

Matthew Beck / Chronicle photo editor

Under the warm sun, a dozen fifth-graders ventured along the shallow coast of King's Bay, pulling plants from buckets and planting them in the sandy floor of the spring.

These plants, known as eelgrass, are vital for Crystal River's waterways to support various marine life, including manatees.

"If we didn't have eelgrass, the water would be muddy, and you couldn't really swim in it," explained 11-year-old Sophia Soper.

The annual eelgrass planting took place on May 17 at Hunter Springs Park, organized by Save Crystal River and Sea & Shoreline in collaboration with Crystal River Primary School. Throughout the day, students participated in different activities, including learning about marine pollution, observing water filtration under microscopes, experiencing the water's floor with virtual reality goggles, playing on the playground, and planting eelgrass in the water.

They also had the opportunity to take photos with mermaids from Mertailor's Mermaid Aquarium Encounter and enjoy local food and ice cream.

This planting event is part of a science curriculum introduced in 2017 at the school in partnership with Save Crystal River. It allows students from kindergarten to fifth grade to learn about local environmental conservation. Fifth-grade students grow, conduct experiments on, and work with eelgrass throughout the year in preparation for the planting.

Macy Mckethan, an 11-year-old student at CRPS, has experienced the curriculum at every grade level. She expressed her enthusiasm for making a direct impact on her local waterways, saying, "It's awesome. I like knowing that I can help the community and clean the waters that I swim and play in."

Beyond its role as a teaching tool, the eelgrass planting is part of a larger focus on the restoration of King's Bay by Save Crystal River and Sea & Shoreline.

The slimy, hair-like strands of algae known as Lyngbya found in Crystal River's waters block sunlight, clog springs, and are toxic to manatees. It also depletes oxygen levels in the water. The lack of sunlight causes eelgrass and other plants to die off, which affects the survival of manatees and other aquatic animals.

To combat the spread of Lyngbya, Save Crystal River initiated the King's Bay Restoration Project in 2015 in partnership with Sea & Shoreline. The project involves using specially designed vacuums to remove the algae and replanting eelgrass. The eelgrass is protected under manatee-friendly cages until it is fully rooted in the ground, after which the cages are removed. The project's initial goal was to restore 92 acres of water by July 3, which coincided with Crystal River's centennial celebration. According to SCR Secretary Liz Thompson, that goal has already been achieved, leading to a significant transformation.

"Previously, kids couldn't dive and play in the water because it wasn't clean," she said. "Now they have a beautiful ecosystem to enjoy."

The success of the project owes much to its connection with education. The King's Bay Restoration Project received state funding after CRPS students wrote over 6,800 letters to the Legislature. The spread of eelgrass to wider areas also began with the annual planting by students.

Doug Dodd, School Board District 3 Member, emphasized the positive impact the project has had in both the community and the classroom.

"The focus on our natural resources is a wonderful thing, and linking it to our science classes is highly beneficial for our students," Dodd said.

While the initial goal of restoring 92 acres has been met, the organizations plan to expand their restoration efforts to include other waterways such as Magnolia Springs. S&S President Carter Henne emphasized the need for ongoing funding and work to ensure long-term conservation efforts.

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