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Rain doesn't cancel eighth annual 'Planting Day' as fifth-grade students plant eelgrass

By STEVE STEINER Chronicle reporter

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Eventually, this eelgrass stripling will take root and grow as well as expand, to not only serve as food for manatees, but also to combat lyngbya, an algae.

Steve Steiner / Chronicle

For awhile Friday, it appeared that the eighth annual Planting Day at Hunter Springs Park might not take place, as a heavy downpour blanketed Crystal River.

But eventually the storm passed, leaving in its wake a balmy late morning/early afternoon with gentle breezes, but climbing humidity, making it perfect for the estimated 100 fifth-grade students from Crystal River Primary School to eagerly get into the water to plant the eelgrass they had been growing beginning at the start of the school year.

At the start of each school year, usually in October, each fifth-grade class is given eelgrass seedlings they will grow in aquariums. The students are assisted by their teachers who, in addition to helping grow the seedlings, instructs the students on the importance of seagrass and related environmental concerns.

"The teachers do an amazing job," said Lisa More, president of Save Crystal River, the nonprofit that organizes the yearly event. She added that come Planting Day, the students are guided by their teachers, as well as members and volunteers of Save Crystal River. "We have great participation from the community."

For student Rayne Garcia, the entire project was one of both enlightenment and excitement.

"I've learned a lot about marine biology. It's fascinating," said Garcia. One of the things she learned is



Fifth-grade students from Crystal River Primary School hold out their hands to receive eelgrass plants they will then plant in the waters at Hunter Springs Park.

Photos by Steve Steiner / Chronicle



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that eelgrass helps fight lyngbya, an algae that has plagued Kings Bay. "I remember when the water wasn't as good quality as it is today."



Leading these fifth-grade students, a volunteer with Save Crystal River will soon arrive at the point in the water where new eelgrass will be planted.

Steve Steiner/Chronicle

With that, she joined her fifth-grade class when it was their turn to plant the eelgrass they had grown. She and the others listened as Tina Champagne, the treasurer with Save Crystal River, gave step-by-step instructions on how to correctly plant the eelgrass.

She was joined by Janis Tripp, another board member, who emphasized the importance of following the instructions of each adult who would lead the students in small groups to the area where the eelgrass would be planted; that, and making note where they would be stepping in order to not undo the plantings the other fifth-grade classes had already done.

"Hopefully, they won't disturb them," said Tripp.

Once all the eelgrass is planted, it will be protected by cages that will keep manatees and other aquatic life from eating the plants until they are firmly rooted and more mature.

Planting eelgrass, however, wasn't the only activity planned for the fifth-graders. There were events such as an anchor pull, in which students pulled different type anchors on the beach to see what resulted from each style of anchor, and which ones did the most damage, ripping up eelgrass.

In the now eight years of the event, the results of the eelgrass plantings are evident, according to Jessica Mailliez, senior environmental manager for Sea and Shoreline and the project manager on the Kings Bay Restoration Project; Sea and Shoreline is an aquatic restoration firm.

"This year we're celebrating 100 acres restored with the Kings Bay Restoration Program," Mailliez said.



Under the guidance and watchful eyes of teachers, volunteers and Save Crystal River members, fifth-grade students from Crystal River Primary School go about the task of planting eelgrass in the waters of Hunter Springs Park.
Steve Steiner/Chronicle



Rayne Garcia remembers when lyngbya, an algae, populated the water at Hunter Springs Park. Now, with 100 acres of eelgrass planted over the past eight years, she says, the water quality has been improved.
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While Friday's eelgrass planting might be the final direct involvement for many of the students, for those who want to learn and do more, Tripp said, there will be a program, Eco Week, at the YMCA for Kids that will run the week of July 8.

Steve Steiner can be reached at steven.steiner@chronicleonline.com.