

Walk takes city to woods

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NORTH PORT — Coinciding with Earth Day, The Friends of Little Salt Spring hosted a guided nature walk through a wooded area bordering Heron Creek Middle School on Saturday.

Bill Dunson, a professor emeritus of biology at Penn State University, led a group of curious hikers through the pine flatwoods while sharing his knowledge of local ecology.

Because part of the area was heavily farmed but has sat abandoned since the late 1960s, the woods show a distinct divide between new and old growth, which, according to Dunson, presents a great opportunity to teach children about the scientific method.

"It's almost like a criminal investigation; you're looking at the various evidence that we have and putting this all together," Dunson said. "That's why I think it would be such a wonderful place to teach school kids about ecology; not because it is pristine, but because it has been changed."

Although no walking trail currently exists on the property, members of the Florida Native Plant Society have charted out plans for the construction of a trail.

The Friends of Little Salt Spring are preparing to propose the plans to the Sarasota County School District which owns the land.

Dunson's walk loosely followed the proposed trail and gave a glimpse into what the trail could hold with sightings of several uncommon plants, examples of healthy ecology and even a white-tailed deer.

With the property's convenient distance from Glenallen Elementary School, Heron Creek Middle School and North Port High School, Dunson believes it could be invaluable in giving students access to field studies.

"Usually there is a big problem getting the school kids from the school to wherever your field site is. You've got to deal with buses and all these problems," Dunson said.

"Here it is unbelievable. You've got the natural areas and three schools."

An extension to Spring Haven Drive currently planned by the Department of Public Works will run through the property and threatens to block the corridor. "With the current design of that road which has two lanes, a buffer, two bicycle paths and two sidewalks you have a significant barrier, and unless something is designed to mitigate that barrier you are cutting off this thousands of years-old connection," said Lawry Reid, president of The Friends of Little Salt Spring.

Dunson hopes that by preserving the corridor and providing animals with a safe way to traverse the road extension it will give future generations natural land to enjoy and inspiration to learn more about ecology.

"Everything around us is just massive chock-a-block development. This is really the only remaining open space along with the University of Miami property and that's why it's so valuable," Dunson said. "These tens and thousands of people living around here are going to cherish this pretty much forever in the future if it is saved."



Left: Bill Dunson explains local plants on Saturday, Earth Day, to a group of hikers checking out a wooded area bordering Heron Creek Middle School.
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