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Families Discover the Wonders of their Backyards at EcoFest

WABASSO ISLAND, FL – The Environmental Learning Center’s 64-acre island campus is filling with activities, art projects, craft booths, and live music for EcoFest. The 14th annual celebration takes place Sunday, March 7th from 12 to 4 pm. It is free and open to the public.

Every year a fresh and different theme is selected for EcoFest. Co-Chairs Tamara Garcia and Jan Garrison selected “Our Own Backyard” for this year’s theme. Their committee began their planning efforts last fall by researching what wildlife and plants we might find in our own backyards. From their findings, they designed a dozen craft booths where elementary age students can make-and-take an eco-friendly project. Pet turtles made from leaves of a sea grape tree will please a parent (no long-term feeding needed). Jelly fish, creatures living in the Indian River Lagoon, are being made out of re-used water bottles. The Garden Club of Indian River County members are helping youngsters plant an organic sunflower seed in a peat pot, while Growing Healthy Kids representatives show the benefits of eating with nutrition in mind by tenderly planting an herb in a re-used pot. All booths proudly encourage reusing or recycling in keeping with ELC’s conservation practices.

For well over a decade, The River Rats band has been playing on the main stage at EcoFest. This year is no exception. But this year the loveable and jovial Billy Willer will, for the first time, not be part of the musical group. Billy died last year and in his honor, this 14th annual EcoFest is dedicated in his memory. Rumor has it that many of Billy’s musical buddies are coming out to play a few tunes in celebration of their good chum. If you are a fan of local musical talent, plan to spend the afternoon in centerfield to see who shows up to play.

Exploring the campus is a must during EcoFest. Tucked away in quiet, shaded spots are birds of prey from the Treasure Coast Wildlife Center and snakes from the Treasure Coast Herpetological Society. In the Master Naturalist's water-filled tanks are small creatures such as shrimp, crabs, and seahorses which typically inhabit seagrass beds found thriving in the brackish waters of the Indian River Lagoon. Be sure to find the trail to the pond for dip netting activities and fly tying lessons.

Education is at the heart of EcoFest. After all, it is organized by the Environmental Learning Center, a private, non-profit nature center started in 1988 with a mission of environmental education. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission is coming to EcoFest with their traveling trailer loaded with information on how we can live more compatibly with hatching baby sea turtles. If your home is on or near the beaches of the Atlantic Ocean, don't miss this. Other demonstrations offered periodically throughout the day are how to build a rain barrel and understanding how our backyards can impact watersheds.

Storytellers are nestling themselves under the shade of giant oak trees for stories every hour and half-hour. If exercise is more to your liking, ELC's trained Canoe Guides will meet you at the south-side dock for easy paddles through the waterway trails winding throughout a mangrove forest. Kayaks Etc. is launching their enormous kayak for those who prefer a group experience.

EcoFest is an ideal afternoon for families with young children. Everything is free. Parking is along the Wabasso Causeway with two shuttles running all afternoon. Park, hop on a shuttle for the 4-minute ride to EcoFest. Parking and shuttle service are free thanks to EcoFest Sponsors AT&T Real Yellow Pages®, DHI Advertising and Design, George E. Warren Corp., Gould Cooksey Fennel, P.A., John's Island Real Estate, Press Journal, and WINDSOR Real Estate.

Food vendors selling burgers, Greek delights, fruit kabobs, popcorn, drinks, and other treats will all be located in the Food Court area. Prices are set at family friendly amounts.

The winners of the 14th annual Making a Difference in MY World school contest, sponsored by Florida Power & Light Co., are being announced on the stage at 2:30p. Every project is displayed so plan to spend time marveling at the animal masks, postage stamps, sailor's hats, and insects lovingly created by kindergarten through fifth grade students.

The Environmental Learning Center is located along the Indian River Lagoon Scenic Highway north of Vero Beach. It is between US#1 and A-1-A on the south side of County Road 510 at the western end of the tall Wabasso Bridge. For EcoFest questions, call (772) 589-5050 or visit www.DiscoverELC.org.