



Seventh-graders from Sebastian Middle School traded their books and pens for nets and vials in the kick-off for the new Learning in Florida's Environment program at the Guana Reserve.

"Why can't every day be like this?" students asked, one teacher noted.

The students at the Guana Tolomato Matanzas National Estuarine Research Reserve joined the Florida Department of Environmental Protections and officials from the St. Johns County School District for the LIFE program.

There they conducted three field studies -- water quality testing, salt marsh vegetation survey and a seining and plankton study -- demonstrating the connection of living and nonliving factors and their influence on the estuarine environment.

"You could see the connection the students made from the book-learning in class to the hands-on learning they did out in the field," said Janet Zimmerman, education coordinator for the Guana Reserve. "And they had a great time."



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DEP NORTHEAST DISTRICT biologist Lacey Smith, far right, with students Spencer Laviolette and Brooke Strickland, identify the fish caught in the seine net.



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GTM RESERVE VOLUNTEER Tom Harding, far right, and Sebastian Middle School seventh graders gather fish and shrimp caught in the seine net. Pictured from left are, Renee Benet, teacher; Christa McCullough, partially hidden; and Brooke Strickland. Contributed photos

Seventh-grader Rebecca Smith said her favorite part was wading in the river with nets to study fish.

"We were all really excited. We wanted to get in the water," she said. "We got dirty, that's for sure."

Rebecca said it seemed like everyone had a good time.

"They got everybody involved," she said. "There was no one standing off to the side."

Teachers from the school met with Guana Reserve staff to create curriculum for trip, including pre- and post-trip, lessons.

"It was a lot of extra work for the teachers, but when you see your kids excited about learning, it's worth it," said seventh grade science teacher Glenn Arnett.

Officials from the St. Johns County School District observed the launch of the program to experience the environmental education aspects of the course.

"We are excited about the environmental science opportunities for our students at the reserve," said Dr. Joseph Joyner, superintendent of St. Johns County Schools. "Conducting hands-on experiments and real life research right in the environment is a terrific benefit for our students."



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IDENTIFYING SALT marsh plants are Annie Heidler, from left; Jennifer Dubose and Katie Garcia.

The program at the Guana Reserve is meant to provide students with an opportunity to experience science education outside of the classroom and conduct the same scientific experiments as the Guana Reserve researchers.

"The LIFE program encourages student interest in research and science in an outdoor environment," explains DEP secretary Colleen Castille. "Every field lab assignment teaches the students to respect natural resources while exploring environmental science."



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AT THE PLANKTON station with DEP Northeast District biologist Sharon Taylor, far right, are from left, Jason Mitchell, Cody Johnson, Jayde Robinson, Megan Carraway and Brittany Rehm.

The LIFE program is designed to provide hands-on environmental education to middle school students, while at the same time providing professional development for teachers. The program partners the Florida DEP with a local school district at different sites statewide, developing the curriculum and activities for each site specifically for the ecosystem of the area.

For information:

For information about the LIFE program, visit www.dep.state.fl.us/secretary/ed/default.htm.