

Teachers get their feet wet in aquatic systems workshop

The five-day program combines instruction with fieldwork in a UF-created, 3-acre wetland.



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Mark Clark, center, an assistant professor of wetland ecology, talks Monday with a group of science teachers from across Florida about the Stormwater Ecological Enhancement Project, a man-made wetland on the University of Florida campus.

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About 17 elementary, middle and high school science teachers waded through a wetland just south of Hull Road on the University of Florida campus Monday as part of a class to make them better teachers.

The teachers, who came from across Florida, gathered at UF to take part in a five-day, interactive aquatic systems workshop.

The workshop is part of the Summer Science Institute, a program in its fifth year offered by the UF Center for Precollegiate Education and Training.

The institute is designed to allow science teachers to update their knowledge and laboratory experience by working with UF faculty and graduate students, performing research and talking with industry leaders.

For this workshop, the teachers spend each morning in a lecture or in the laboratory and the afternoons doing fieldwork alongside UF faculty.

They learn about current research being done about surface water, groundwater and coastal environments, said Steve Everett, the workshop coordinator and an environmental science teacher at Eastside High School in Gainesville.

Everett said it's crucial for the teachers to spend time in the field so they can successfully take back what they learn to their students. "How can you learn about water without immersing yourself in it?" he asked.

Gainesville environmental science teacher Leigh Larsen said she always comes away from workshops with at least one or two new activities to try in her classroom.

"These workshops are more about keeping current with the research, but I always manage to bring some of the hands-on stuff we do here to my students," said Larsen, who teaches at Buchholz High School. "It's just a shame that I can't actually bring them out to wetlands."

As Mark W. Clark, an assistant professor of wetland ecology at UF, led the group through three acres of wetlands, the teachers learned how stormwater runoff is filtered by plants, such as cattails, to eventually emerge as clean water.

The wetland, called SEEP for "stormwater ecological enhancement project," was designed and built by UF students and faculty to help manage stormwater runoff that would otherwise pollute the Floridan Aquifer and other water systems.

Larsen said she has attended many UF workshops like this one, and the knowledge she gains in a week of intensive study is invaluable to effectively teaching her students.

Although this is the first year the "Aquatic Systems: Emerging Problems and Creative Solutions" workshop has been offered, Everett said he hopes it will be available in the future.

Besides supplementing teachers' knowledge and giving them tools to take back to the classroom, the workshop also helps teachers receive credit toward their recertification requirement.

Lisa Kiernan, an eighth-grade physical science teacher who traveled from Jacksonville to attend the workshop, said it gives teachers a way to increase students' exposure to experimentation.

"We struggle teaching the wetlands and runoff because it's just not practical to bring every student out into the field," she said.

Kiernan said money for experiments is often the first thing school districts cut when looking to trim the budget, but doing so makes it virtually impossible to teach complex scientific processes, such as what happens to stormwater runoff.

"But after this workshop is over, I expect to be able to take back what I've learned and build lesson plans that are truly meaningful."