

Second Annual Conservation Connection Day was a success.

The setting was ideal, the weather was beautiful, visitors were smiling and kids were laughing during the second annual Conservation Connection Day on March 7th at the Bert J. Harris Jr. Agricultural Center.

Anyone who has ever planned a special event knows how much work goes into it. Without the help of so many, the event simply wouldn't happen or it would not be successful. We, at the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District (HSWCD) are so grateful for all of the wonderful volunteers that stepped up and helped out on that special Saturday. Because of their assistance, about 350 hot dogs were grilled and served, booths were manned, exhibits were set up and everything ran smoothly.

Last year in June, the HSWCD decided to hold an event that would encourage citizens and environmental agencies to interact with each other and exchange information. Sometimes government can be confusing and this was our effort to "bridge the gap." The citizens from Highlands County were able to have their questions answered and obtain information about what all the agencies do. We want our citizens to know where they need to go and who they need to contact when they have environmental questions and issues. We also had the chance to let them know what we do and what we're all about and where some of their tax dollars go.

The event was a success, but we did get some constructive criticism and decided to do it up bigger and better this year. Some of the ideas that citizens shared with staff last year were: to have it on a Saturday so the working folks could attend, to have it in the cooler months so it wouldn't be so hot (last year's event was held outdoors), and to have it indoors as well as outdoors. Making the event even better, the Highlands County Extension Office and Sustainability Committee joined us with their "Think Green and Lead" event. This event featured "green" vendors and suppliers, allowing visitors to learn what is available in the "green" industry as well as what the different environmental agencies do.

This year's Saturday event was both indoors and outdoors. We incorporated a "kids section" to appeal to the younger generation. We wanted to make sure that if parents wanted to come, their kids would have something to do and they could all get something out of the event. Complete with educational booths where children could complete environmental projects, face painting, clowns, a bounce house and giant slide, the kids did seem to be having a very good time. Home Depot came out and the children built derby car track kits to take home. They had the chance to make a water cycle wristband, paper mache' objects made from recycled paper, plant a seed, play environmental wheel of fortune and pet a snake! What more could any child want?

Adults were delighted to learn about the many different agencies and vendors that participated and walked away with lots of free give a ways! The environmental agencies that participated this year included: Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Highlands County Extension and Master Gardeners, Highlands County 4-H, Keep Highlands County Beautiful, South Dade Soil and Water Conservation District, South Florida Water Management District, Division of Forestry, Avon Park Bombing Range, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Highlands County Lakes Association, Highlands County Citrus Growers Association, Highlands Hammock State Park, Riverwoods Field Lab, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Ridge Rangers, Archbold Biological Station, Wrede's Wildlife Rehabilitation Center, Inc., and Florida's Freshwater Frontier. Vendors displaying "green products" included Team Green Cleaning, Shaklee, Eldridge Pollard Sales, Carter Construction, Adaptive Builders, Happy Trails Aquatics and Southeast

Carbon.

A special thank you goes out to our wonderful volunteers: Eric Maron, Ed Cunningham and Gerald Hibbs. These three men came to our rescue when we told them that we wanted a watershed model for the event. They built the model in record time and did a beautiful job. In addition, Eric and Ed helped out all day during the event, serving hot dogs, setting up tents, tables and banners, and assisting with any and all tasks that came up. John Riggerio from the Highlands County Lakes Association graciously grilled over 350 hot dogs for our guests. Jan Townsend from South Dade Soil and Water Conservation District helped with ideas and manpower. Alexis Pontius, Bruce Clament and Laura Tenneson delighted the children by helping out at the bounce house, big slide and face painting. Folks from the Sustainability Committee, Highlands County Extension and Master Gardeners all helped out tremendously. Thanks to Ed Ayen, Shirley Bauhman, Christy Swift, Penny Bucher, Frank and Marcella Giersey (clowns), and Carol Barnhardt who all helped with set up and manning booths as well as entertaining the kids in other ways. A big thank you to Blake Linville and Ann Hardy for all the help with the planning and setting up of the event.

The staff at HSWCD would like to thank all of the agencies, vendors and volunteers for coming out and helping to make the event the success that it was. Thanks to Highlands County Facilities Management for all the help with set up and take down. Also thanks to Publix, Brewster's, HC Citrus Growers, HSWCD and Home Depot for providing food, refreshments and supplies for the event. But mostly, thanks to our wonderful HSWCD Board of Supervisors for allowing us to have the event and supporting us when we come up with these ideas.

It is the hope of the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District that people walked away with a better understanding of our precious natural resources. We hope that the kids not only had fun, but have a better idea of what they can do to be good stewards of the environment. Thanks to all who came out to support us and join in the festivities!