

Heroes of Highlands County

The clarity of Lake Tulane during the September 19th lake clean up helped 21 volunteers find plenty of submerged trash. This cleanup was done in conjunction with The Ocean Conservancy's International Coastline Cleanup Day. The Highlands County Lakes Association and the residents around the lake hosted the event. Supplies were furnished by Keep Highlands County Beautiful and The Ocean Conservancy. Residents, volunteers and Highlands County staff collected over 1/3 of a dumpster full of garbage from the lake and surrounding area. Of the many lake cleanups held each year, this particular one stands out. While cleaning the area, a native freshwater turtle was rescued from certain death by two volunteers.

Dale Flemick and Mark Devlin were aboard a boat which they were using to haul garbage out of the lake and along the coastline. While looking for trash, these two heroes saw a turtle struggling to get some air. As they approached the creature, they noticed that it was tangled in fishing line and could not swim well or get to shore. They immediately got in the water and untangled the monofilament line from the reptile and set it free.

Another unsung hero of Highlands County is Daniel Dean Wilson. He has recently volunteered for the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District to collect monofilament line from the bins located in various areas in the County. The Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District sponsors a Monofilament Recycling and Recovery Program (MRRP). The MRRP program takes used fishing line and sends it to the Berkley Conservation Institute in Iowa. Berkley melts the line down into raw plastic pellets that can be made into other plastic products including tackle boxes, spools for line, fish habitats, and toys. So not only does the program save wildlife, it recycles this potentially dangerous line into useful items. Thanks to Daniel and folks like him that collect the fishing line from these bins, countless animals are saved.

When Daniel was asked why he volunteered for this program, he stated, "I know what fishing line does to boat motors and animals. It is very harmful and everything that can be done with it should be. I once found an osprey hanging in a tree from monofilament line. I have also seen vultures hanging in the same way. I actually had a gopher tortoise walk through my yard with fishing line wrapped around his legs and part of his shell and I don't even live near a lake."

The MRRP Program was initially funded by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. They provided a one year grant to get the program started. The program is still going strong, but additional funding to expand and keep it going is needed. So far, over 1,000 pounds of monofilament line has been recovered from outdoor recycling bins, dive cleanups, shoreline cleanups and collected at tackle shops.

After seeing, first hand, what monofilament line can do to turtles and other creatures we know how critical it is that monofilament line is not left behind in the waters and surrounding areas. Did you know that in a five year period, 163 turtles, 35 dolphins, and countless birds and fish were found entangled in monofilament line? Most monofilament is non-biodegradable and lasts about 600 years. Because it is difficult to see by most wildlife, they may swim or fly into it and get tangled up. Other animals may accidentally eat it. The line does not digest and will

eventually kill the animal that ingests it. It is unfortunate that so many animals suffer and die each year as a result of mankind's disregard for their environment.

Thanks to volunteers such as the Dale, Mark and Daniel, many animals are saved from a torturous death by careless use of fishing line. The Highlands County Lakes Association hosts several lake clean-ups each year and they supply a delicious lunch for all who participate. You can be a hero and have fun in the process by helping out with volunteer programs such as these or simply by recycling your fishing line.

Watch your local newspapers for dates of future lake clean-ups. If you want to get involved in other volunteer programs, please give us a call at 402-6545. You can make a difference.