

Students take part in helping the environment.

Last year Sebring High School students got a chance to learn about ponds and wetlands in their environment through a Splash! Grant that was obtained by Jill Scott, 9th and 10th grade Integrated Science teacher. The \$3,813.00 grant was used to put in a pond located near the agriculture barn at the school. This wetland/pond water system will provide students with educational opportunities related to nutrient cycling in aquatic ecosystems, native aquatic plant and animal habitat, and wetland water treatment systems for aquaculture.

Last year, before the pond was installed, the staff from Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District worked with students to teach them what steps are involved in putting in a pond. Some of the hands-on training included students using a laser level to measure the fall of the land, how to take measurements, read a range pole, record the data and calculate the information. This taught them that a pond is more than just a hole in the ground and that it takes quite a lot of work to put one in.

Now that the pond is in place, students are learning about water quality and what types of plants and filtration are needed for this new addition. On October 30th, Erin McCarta, Lakes Management Assistant and Corine Burgess, Natural Resource Specialist instructed 2 Integrated Science classes on water quality. Included in the day's education were testing the water with meters that detect dissolved oxygen, Ph, temperature and other information needed to study the quality of the water. Students participated in the testing of the water as well as the recording of the data.

Future visits to the school will include teaching the students about what types of plants are needed to filter the water and attract aquatic animals to the site. One of the seed types that the students disbursed during the October visit was the American Lotus. The flowers of this plant are large (to 10 inches across) yellowish-white to yellow with more than 20 petals. The center of the flower, the seed structure, is cone-shaped (or like an inverted shower-head) and has openings in which the seeds develop. Lotus can form large colonies and spreads by seeds and large fleshy rhizomes.

Submerged portions of all aquatic plants provide habitats for many micro and macro invertebrates. These invertebrates in turn are used as food by fish and other wildlife species. After aquatic plants die, their decomposition by bacteria and fungi provides food (called "detritus") for many aquatic invertebrates. The large acorn like seeds of lotus are utilized by some ducks and other wildlife. This is the first of many types of plants that will be planted near the pond.

Hallie Webb, lead agricultural teacher, provided the plot of land where the pond is located. Because of his agreement to share his agriculture land area, along with the help and assistance of countless school board members and teachers the pond is now a reality. Hallie also played a major role in the physical aspects of the pond installation.

Evidence indicates that American students' interest in science education and scientific careers has declined over the past several decades. With this decline in the interest in science comes the lack

of qualified and trained people to fill scientific jobs. Recent statistics show a decline of graduating scientists and engineers from our universities. This appears to be a threat to tech businesses and our country as a world leader. The shift seems to begin as early as middle school.

Hopefully, with the help of grants like this one and people who put forth the effort to educate our children in scientific subjects, this problem will not be a lasting one. Making science fun, exciting and hands-on may be a way to inspire students to pursue higher education and careers in science based subjects.

The Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District and Sebring High School staff hope that projects such as the pond will allow students the opportunity to learn first-hand about wetlands and other environmental areas. This venture brings teachers, students, and governmental agencies together working toward a common goal. Teaching our future generations about our fragile and precious environment is vital. It is important that they understand what needs to be done to keep our earth healthy. Today's children must have a passion for this planet and take ownership in its wellbeing for future generations.