

Work day on April 22nd at Highlands Hammock State Park recognizes Earth Day and National Volunteer Week

By: Corine Burgess

One of the biggest environmental nightmares of our time happened in January of 1969. A Union Oil Company platform located near Santa Barbara, California caused a disaster of huge magnitude. When workers were replacing a drill bit, a natural gas blowout occurred. As a result, 5 breaks in the fault on the ocean floor released oil and gas from deep beneath the earth. Over 100,000 gallons of crude oil was released into the ocean and it spread into an 800 mile slick before it was capped. The spill affected 35 miles of coastline and killed over 10,000 birds and countless other sea creatures.

The animals that were dependent on the waters suffered the most. During the crisis, the tides brought corpses of seals, dolphins and whales to the beach. The thick oil clogged the blowholes of dolphins, causing their lungs to hemorrhage. The creatures that ingested the sludge were poisoned and whales that normally used that area to give birth avoided the place and found another area. Diving birds were soaked with tar leaving them so helpless that rescuers could literally walk right up to them and pick them up.

Cleaning up the mess was a major undertaking. It took over 11 days just to get the oil spill under control. Planes dumped detergents on the tar covered ocean in an attempt to break up the slick. The chemicals in the detergent robbed bird's feathers of their natural waterproofing which kept them afloat. Straw was spread on the beaches to soak up the oil that reached the shoreline. The rocks on the beach were steamed cleaned, killing every living thing that lived there such as snails, mussels and crabs.

As depressing as this information is, something good came from it. Senator Gaylord Nelson, an environmental activist, was outraged by the devastation of the disaster. As a result, he decided to propose a national teach-in on the environment that would be observed by every college campus in the United States. Passionate about the cause, he stated, "I am convinced that all we need to do to bring an overwhelming insistence of the new generation that we stem the tide of environmental disaster is to present the facts clearly and dramatically. To marshal such an effort, I am proposing a national teach-in on the crisis of the environment to be held next spring on every university campus across the Nation. The crisis is so imminent, in my opinion, that every university should set aside 1 day in the school year-the same day across the Nation-for the teach-in."

Apparently there were plenty of people that shared Senator Nelson's passion for the environment. Over 20 million people participated in the first "teach-in," now called Earth Day. Since that monumental day, Earth Day is celebrated on April 22 each year by more than 500 million people and several national governments in 175 countries.

Interestingly, National Volunteer Week is April 19 – 25 and Earth Day falls right in the middle of that timeframe. Volunteers donate millions of community service hours every year. Government alone cannot address all of the nation's problems; we depend heavily on volunteers who give unselfishly and connect with local communities. The need for volunteer organizations continues to grow in an effort to address on-going social issues. National Volunteer Week recognizes the contributions of volunteers nationwide.

To celebrate our volunteers and Earth Day, the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District is teaming up with the staff at Highlands Hammock State Park to hold a “working” Earth Day. We welcome anyone who would like to come out and give a little time to help the environment. Highlands Hammock State Park is a treasure for Highlands County. Unfortunately, many exotic plants have made their home there and it has become necessary to “uproot” these pests from the park. Exotic plants have found their way here from other areas and because of our tropical climate and fertile soil, they grow unchecked. Add this to the fact that they have no natural enemies here and it is plain to see how they are getting out of control.

Celebrate Earth Day by helping your local park. Volunteer your time and be a part of National Volunteer Week. Come out to Highlands Hammock State Park on April 22nd from 10:00 a.m. until noon and help pull out some pesky plants so that the critters can have their place back in its natural state.

For more information, give us a call at (863) 402-6545 or visit our website at www.highlandsswcd.org.