

National Wetlands Month

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May is National Wetlands Month and it is a good time to appreciate all that these valuable plant communities have to offer. Wetlands are sometimes thought of as sponges, filters and kidneys of the land. The reason is simple; the function they serve is the same as those mentioned. Wetlands literally remove toxins and other substances that flow through them. Let's take a swamp as an example. A swamp is simply any wetland that is dominated by woody plants. The soils there are generally saturated with water most of the year. As water flows through the swamp, the roots of the plants trap many pollutants and sediments which may then sink and settle to the bottom rather than travel to their original destination. Because of these areas and other types of wetlands, the majority of the water that reaches our lakes and eventually the ocean, is cleaner and healthier.

Another important function of a wetland is flood control. Without these sponge type ecosystems, a lot more water reaches the lake. The function of the wetland is to hold water, therefore, if the wetland is taken out, the water has no where else to go and in its travels will most likely flood a few areas on its way.

A wetland also has the ability to store water, which helps protect and replenish surface and underground water sources. Our aquifers, where we get the majority of our drinking water, are assisted by the existence of these important areas.

Wetlands are home to countless species of plant and animal life. Aquatic vegetation flourishes in these areas and provides shelter and food for the wildlife that resides there and in surrounding areas. Wetlands are the favorite plant community of many species for a number of reasons. Smaller animals find shelter from predators in the wetlands. Nesting conditions are ideal for waterfowl and migratory birds enjoy a safe place to stop and rest during their long flight. Wetlands serve as a nursery and spawning habitat for many species of fish and shellfish and perhaps most importantly, they provide an important link in the food chain for both animals and man. In fact, according to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, "Wetlands are among the most biologically productive natural ecosystems in the world, comparable to rain forests and coral reefs in their productivity and diversity of species they support."

Recreational opportunities in these pristine areas are endless. Fees charged to enter many wetland areas help boost the economy and provide a unique, natural experience for visitors. Hiking, biking, bird watching and hunting are all activities that are popular in wetlands.

Nationally 60% of our freshwater wetlands are lost to development. Not only is this loss of actual wetland area a problem, but as more development takes place, there is an increase in pollutants and chemicals that may overload the few existing wetland's ability to deal with them. We all know that development is necessary. We need houses, schools, hospitals and roads. However there are steps that can be taken to lessen the impact on these valuable areas.

Restoration of degraded wetlands, protection and limitations of building near wetlands, planting native vegetation, limiting fertilizers and other chemicals, education, and taking action to support

and promote wetlands by joining or participating in groups or cleanup projects are steps that can be taken to help protect these ecosystems.

This May, take time to learn about wetlands. Highlands County is full of them and this may be a great month to get out and visit one first hand. There are quite a few beautiful areas that you can visit to get into the “wetland” mind set. The Sun ‘n Lake Preserve, Lake Istokpoga Park and Highlands Hammock State Park are just a few of the protected areas in our county that invite the visitor to enjoy nature.