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UF/IFAS looks at marine life



Savanna Barry, a regional specialized Florida Sea Grant agent with the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Extension, speaks to members and guests at the Thursday afternoon (July 14) meeting of the Dixie County Chamber of Commerce in Cross City at the Dixie County Public Library.



Story and Photos

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© July 14, 2016 @ 9:17 p.m.

DIXIE COUNTY – The new facility being built by UF/IFAS on Cedar Key was among the things addressed Thursday (July 14) at the Dixie County Chamber of Commerce meeting.

Savanna Barry, a regional specialized Florida Sea Grant agent

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with the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) Extension was the keynote speaker of the day.

The Florida Sea Grant, she said, is similar to the Florida Land Grant concept of UF/IFAS. Rather than an agent helping agriculture, one aspect of a sea grant agent is to help aquaculture and other aspects of the natural resources along the Nature Coast.

This research station, she said, provides a centralized location for natural resource research, education and outreach – public engagement.

By the way, the Chamber plans to reduce the time for keynote speakers and increase the time during the monthly meetings for members to discuss business matters in Dixie County.

Barry said UF/IFAS bought a motel at the very end of State Road 24 as it goes into Cedar Key to construct a facility for studying the Nature Coast Region of the Gulf of Mexico, and the springs, rivers and other tributaries of the area. This site is now known as the UF/IFAS Nature Coast Biological Station.

Barry's group defines the Nature Coast as going from Hernando County north to Wakulla County.

The coastline is said to be one of America's most pristine, "with extensive seagrass meadows and healthy populations of marine wildlife." The region supports recreational and commercial fisheries, and a vibrant hard clam aquaculture industry as well, a brochure she provided notes.

Natural resources in the Nature Coast area, she said, are vital to the business of Florida's growing ecotourism industry. Where most Florida counties have a 2 percent average of jobs tied to ecotourism, this part of the state has a 13 percent tally for employment linked to this aspect of earning a living.

The goals of the Nature Coast Biological Station are to:

- Develop research projects that improve wildlife conservation, fisheries, aquaculture and sustainable use of natural resources.
- Identify coastal management priorities and work with stakeholders to select a signature focus area for research and public outreach.
- Improve the economic opportunities and education of the region through a comprehensive natural resource extension program.
- Construct a wet lab facility.
- Partner with agency cooperators to secure a boat dock at the new site for overnight mooring of vessels.
- Begin renovation and construction of laboratory spaces and dorm rooms for students, visiting faculty and staff.

Barry spoke about the current sea trout tagging project. There are trout that can be caught off of Cedar Key that have yellow tags on them. If the person catches them, follows the instructions on them, that fisherman can cash in on a \$100 a tag bonus.

And of that trout is of the size to keep, it can be eaten as well as bring the catcher \$100.

Barry said that so far the "slot limit" (size of fish that can be kept rather than just caught and released) are predominantly females. This can be detrimental to the sustainability of a marine resource, because females produce eggs for more fish.

It has been 20 years since research was performed on sea trout to help increase odds for sustainability of that fish, she said.

Four Cedar Key area charter fish captains are helping keep track of the male to female

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ratio, Barry said, as they filet the trout for their customers.

This aspect of the caught trout population has surprised researchers, Barry said.

She said the potential exists for expanding the research to Steinhatchee and Gena areas.

She spoke about other projects the biologists are performing now and activities – including a recent outing by Levy County 4H Day Camp to learn about finding species by using a seine net.

Barry is seeking a person or persons to volunteer in Dixie County to collect monofilament line from disposal stations.

Another point Barry made for boaters in the group is the damage caused by engine propellers on sea grass. She urged everyone to consider not “scarring” the seagrass meadows with props, because that has a very detrimental effect on marine life.

She also urged people to contact her if they know where there are several derelict crab pots that are abandoned.

Those pots are collecting organisms that are just trapped in there and are dying – not helping the crabber or the consumers.

She reminded everyone not to attempt to collect them on their own, because this is a procedure to be overseen by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

There is a significant fine for a person who mistakenly pulls out an active trap, she said.

The Sea Grant scientists are collecting data on those locations for a cleanup, she said. For individuals who know those locations, please send that data to her at savanna.barry@ufl.edu.

She also wants Rotarians or members of other civic groups to send her a note if they would like her to speak at their club meetings.