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Hands-On Marine Science



Kate Hellgren holds a clear container up to show the children a puffer fish and some other marine species that were collected from the water next to the beach where they are standing on Monday (June 19).

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Cedar Key Summer Youth Program offers safe, extraordinary, meaningful fun and tasty experiences



Cedar Key Vice Mayor Sue Colson begins the process to cook shrimp donated by Steamer's Clam Bar & Grill. Children are enjoying aquacultural science lessons this year. Colson is doing a lot of the cooking.

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Story and Photos By Jeff M. Hardison © June 20, 2017 at 9:37 p.m.

CEDAR KEY – Every happy ending has to have a beginning.

And so it is with the happy evolution of the Summer Youth Program in Cedar Key, which is now at a high point.

For at least the past 40 years, the City of Cedar Key has provided some form of a Summer Youth Program, Cedar Key Vice Mayor Sue Colson said Monday (June 19).

Except for last year – when the turnaround to improve the program began – for the past 10 to 15 years, this summer program was more of a daycare service than a summer program, Vice Mayor Colson said.

She felt that it did not provide enough of a meaningful experience for the children. It seemed to be lacking a certain something.

Back then, she said, the children may have felt like they were just stuck in the Cedar Key School Gym.

During some summer days in the past decade or so, the weather became too hot, and without air-conditioning (no public school gyms in Levy County have air-conditioning) that presented issues. Some children suffered from the heat to the extent that they became ill, suffering from heat exhaustion and showing symptoms, such as vomiting.

Back before last year's start of the reformation of the Summer Youth Program, the children only had the gym and one small classroom – to fit upwards of 80 children, Colson said. The city leaders and others worked to overcome that.

Last year, the children used the Cedar Key Community Center, Colson said.

With many Cedar Key parents who work for a living during the weekdays, Colson knows there is a need to provide their children with a safe environment so those children can enjoy summer.

Starting last year, the program began to improve.

Last year, the Cedar Keys Audubon group worked with the children so they could learn about bird rescues, Colson said. They learned about shorebirds and other aspects of island wildlife.

The theme last year, she said, was “What lives in your backyard?”

Colson said she wants the children of Cedar Key to understand that what they see as their normal, everyday habitat is as special as it is. Since they live in this environment, they may not fully appreciate what surrounds them, she said. People come to Cedar Key from other places, in part, to enjoy the natural beauty of the flora and fauna on this set of islands connected by bridges.

And so, “without shoving science down their throats,” Colson's idea for the Cedar Key Summer Youth Program this year is to help them enjoy even more meaningful, hands-on experiences to better appreciate what envelops them on their home island.

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Shrimp on the grill



Live blue crabs in a crate

This summer's topic is "What do we eat in Cedar Key? And what does it eat?" Colson said.

The program includes lessons and hands-on experiences with alligators, mullet, grouper, shrimp, blue crabs, clams, oysters, lobster and other marine life to be studied and in most cases eaten.

Monday (June 19) was National Lobster Day, Colson said, and she even had lobster for the children to eat.

During the first week of camp, the children had an opportunity to enjoy Sturgeon eggs – caviar, Colson said. They learned about this particular prehistoric fish that continues to thrive in this part of Florida today.

In the preliminary stages of creating the curriculum for this summer, Colson was

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speaking with Hannah Healey of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. In that discussion, Colson suggested to Healey that the FWC might consider reinstating its program where children are given fishing poles and reels, and they learn the rules about fishing in Florida.

While the Colson-proposed rods and reels gift concept has not reached fruition yet, there are fishing lessons on the horizon.

The children will be using cast nets on Wednesday (June 21) as a local mullet fisherman – Chad O’Steen – shows them how to catch that type of fish, if all goes as planned. The weather changes plans on occasion. Last Tuesday, the FWC had a potential to take some of the children on kayak adventures, but the Gulf was too rough, Colson said.

As for fishing, the children are making plastic fish out of water bottles, Colson said, and they will try to “catch” the fish using nets, according to the current lesson plan for that part of that day.

Bud Collins will be the man to teach the children about crabbing, Colson said, as she mentioned the help for this summer program is bountiful.

Every Wednesday morning, the youthful summer program participants get to visit the Cedar Key Public Library, Colson said, as they are reminded of another asset that exists for them on this set of islands.

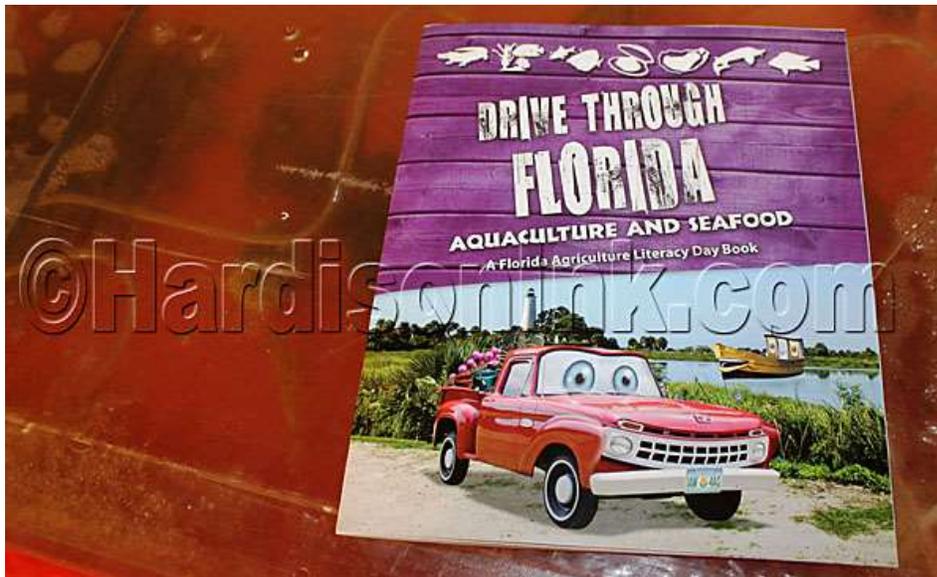
Next Wednesday (June 28), Anna White Hodges is coming to sing, and to read her hurricane book, Colson said.

The book helps children not to fear hurricanes, but to be aware of them.

The American Red Cross is sending a person to teach children how to “pack your pillowcase,” Colson said, in a storm event – “for kids to be prepared. How timely is that?”

Every Thursday, there is an out-of-town field trip. The final one of those is noted to be at a bowling alley.

Healey showed Colson a booklet used to help young students learn about agriculture and aquaculture.



The truck and the car on the cover of this book are characters in the storyline that runs through it. The title of the booklet is *Drive Through Florida, Aquaculture and Seafood, A Florida Agriculture Day Book.*

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It was created for students to learn about Florida Agriculture Day, which was last month.

This is a children's non-fiction book about Florida's Agriculture. Aquaculture is a very important segment of Florida agriculture. According to economic analysis by Dr. Allan Hodges, the direct impact of the aquaculture industry in Florida includes almost 18,000 jobs and has more than \$1.2 billion in economic impact.

Florida commercial fisheries and aquaculture industries includes a wide variety of shellfish and finfish harvested from the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean; as well as aquaculture products including tropical fish, alligator, oysters and clams, and aquatic plants.

Cedar Key is so well known for its clam crop, that it is highlighted in the book for that.

Using this booklet as a centerpiece for forming lesson plans and activities, the summer of fun is off to a grand start.

The children have already learned about alligators.

H. Franklin Percival, Ph.D., came to help the campers learn about this reptile. Dr. Percival is a courtesy associate professor at the University of Florida's Wildlife Ecology and Conservation Department.

Every child was able to hold a live baby alligator and have their picture taken with it. That program last week, provided those pictures for Fathers' Day gifts.

Then, Colson said, the campers had an opportunity to enjoy some cooked farm-raised alligator tail.



The youngest one-third of the summer program's participants wave as they go in an orderly fashion toward a beachline outdoor laboratory.

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Kate Hellgren of the UF Nature Coast Biological Station at Cedar Key teaches children about marine animals.



Hunter Burney, standing, is a volunteer from Gainesville. He is a University of Florida student. Leaning down toward a bucket is 15-year-old fellow summer program participant Trey Stanfield, who is assisting Hellgren as a volunteer,

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Kate Hellgren holds a clear container up to show the children a puffer fish and some other marine species that were collected from the water next to the beach where they are standing on Monday.

On Monday (June 19) Kate Hellgren, a Florida Master Naturalist Program Coordinator with the UF Nature Coast Biological Station at Cedar Key, asked the children about alligators. This learning process of reciting what was learned in a previous experience reinforces that first lesson.

There were three groups of campers visiting with Hellgren, Hunter Burney, a 21-year-old volunteer from Gainesville and Trey Stanfield, a 15-year-old camper who volunteered to help that day.

When the youngest children were at the beachside, Hellgren reminded them of what alligators do with their feet, tails, claws and teeth, by prompting them with questions and then listening to their answers.

Hellgren asked the children if they enjoyed eating alligator tail last week. All of the children said they did. One girl mentioned that she did not like “Sturgeon eggs” however, and Hellgren reminded her that food is called caviar.

The educator spoke about habitat. Children said air, water, food and shelter are among the first necessary factors needed for survival of any species in any habitat. Hellgren then showed the children some live marine creatures that had been collected using a seine net near that beach, which is to the east of the school.

Monday (June 19) heralded the start of the second week of this five-week summer program. This year’s program has attained a pinnacle of fun, food and memorable experiences.

This summer’s program is far and away the best ever, Vice Mayor Colson intimated.

The Cedar Key Summer Youth Program this year includes an exciting curriculum reflective of Cedar Key aquaculture and more.

This year, the key to success is found in a formula where there is a joint effort put

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forth by City of Cedar Key, Cedar Key School, the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (especially the UF Nature Coast Biological Station at Cedar Key), the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

Another few elements helping the children this summer are donations from some local business interests – like Steamer’s Clam Bar & Grill, which donated shrimp for lunch on Monday; and donations by private people.

Three fishing guides volunteered to take some of the older children out to fish for grouper. The program this summer includes children from kindergarten through next fall’s twelfth graders.

This extraordinary program is very inexpensive.

The parents pay a mere \$20 all-together per child to participate in this Summer Youth Program. It runs from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Thursday, for five weeks from June 12 to July 12.

That \$20 is the whole price for the five-week program, which includes field trips on boats, to a bowling alley (at the end), and it includes all of those lunches, guest speakers and everything else.



Children play indoor games like foosball, air hockey and pool. In the background, Cedar Key Police Sgt. David Perry watches the children and interacts with them.

Not only are the children enjoying a theme-oriented, meaningful, hands-on, educational experience, but there are games like pool, air hockey and foosball available in the multi-purpose auditorium at Cedar Key School.

Cedar Key Police Sgt. David Perry, who is the School Resource Officer at Cedar Key School, is helping with the summer program too.

Sgt. Perry said the children also get to enjoy fun games in the gym, including kickball and basketball.

The other adult helpers include Patty Shewey, Telicia Winfield, Lisa Custer and James Custer.

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Cedar Key School Principal Joshua Slep in his office on Monday.

CKS Principal Joshua Slep has been extremely supportive of the improved Cedar Key Summer Youth Program, Colson said. She is very grateful for Principal Slep's help.

"So it is working," Colson said. "This has become a city extravaganza. I don't think any children in the state of Florida are getting any kind of curriculum like this, with this level of cooperation -- with what we could cobble together."

The vice mayor said the University of Florida's participation has been phenomenal. The FWC and every group that has been approached has been cooperative to make this succeed as well, she said.

"It's just fabulous," Colson said. "The children of Cedar Key are learning what each critter eats. They are learning some science. I just don't know how a program could improve on this."

Mayor Heath Davis and the entire Cedar Key City Commission join Vice Mayor Colson in being very pleased to see the progress made this year to the summer set of activities for island children.

While some number of the past years may not have included the ultimate best summer programs in Cedar Key, this one is a great one. As Leigh Bingham Nash of Sixpence None the Richer sings "But tension is to be loved when it is like a passing note to a beautiful, beautiful chord." (The lyrics to Tension Is A Passing Note were written by Matthew Preston Slocum.)