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Nature Coast Biological Station annual open house provides learning opportunities



**A Learning Moment
Alicia Rohan of
Gainesville holds her
daughter Harlow
Rohan, 4, as they look
into a tank with
marine creatures
during the open house
at the Nature Coast
Biological Station in
Cedar Key on Saturday
(Sept. 22).**

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**Dr. Mike Allen
stands on an
area between
the Gulf of
Mexico and the
structures that
comprise the
University of
Florida's
Institute of
Food and
Agricultural
Sciences Nature
Coast Biological
Station on
Cedar Key on
Saturday (Sept.
22). Dr. Allen
was appointed
Director of the
Nature Coast Biological Station in 2015. The majority of construction was completed last year, and this was the first annual Open House after that initial ribbon-cutting moment then.**



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Story and Photos

By Jeff M. Hardison © Sept. 23, 2018 at 9:08 a.m.

CEDAR KEY – The University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences’ crown jewel of freshwater, saltwater and estuarine research conducted its first annual open house event Saturday (Sept. 22), giving the general public an opportunity to tour the facility and learn as much as any person wanted.

United States Coast Guard Auxiliary Flotilla Commander John P. Caddigan of Flotilla 15-2 of Yankeetown shares information with a visitor about the USCG Auxiliary.



Linda Headley, a master naturalist from Dixie County, holds a horseshoe crab. Headley was one of three master naturalists at the event who were there to help people better understand the nature of some marine creatures and the environment. Other master naturalists there were Linda Redditt of Dixie County and Gale Pierce of Williston. Among the many interesting things about horseshoe crabs that Headley shared is that these creatures have six eyes. The female is huge and must be at least 10 years old before she lays eggs in the sand on the beach, and the male fertilizes them. These animals have 750 muscles. Also, the male can connect to the shell of the female, and she can carry him around.



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A male horseshoe crab stands in a tank for people to see during the open house. There is a program for people to help researchers. <https://www.fws.gov/crabtag/> is a site for reporting horseshoe crabs that are found if they have been tagged. The reflection of light from the surface of the water is what causes the white areas in this photo.



Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Biologist Johnny Polasik (wearing a dark blue shirt on the right side of the photo) and FWC Biologist Chelsea Conley (light blue shirt) speak to people about different creatures – including snook (seen as a fiberglass version on the wall behind Biologist Conley), a delicious fish that is very regulated to protect it from extinction. These two full-time biologists are also graduate students at the University of Florida, having completed their undergraduate degrees at other colleges.

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Dr. Laura Reynolds (wearing sunglasses and a purple shirt on the right of the photo), an assistant professor at the University of Florida, and Sawyer Downey (wearing a ball cap and orange shirt



on the right side of the photo), a UF undergraduate intern, speak to people about seagrass ecology. They are part of the UF/IFAS Nature Coast Biological Station Seagrass Ecology Research Team. Other members of that set of scientists are Whitney Scheffel, biological scientist; Dr. Charles Martin, assistant professor; Dr. Savannah Barry, sea grant regional agent; Jamila Roth, doctoral student; Cayla Sullivan, master's degree student; Dr. Ashley McDonald, postdoctoral researcher; Audrey Looby, master's degree student; Scott Alford, doctoral student; Theresa Gruninger, master's degree student; Samantha Tiffany, biological scientist; and Christina Mareau, biological scientist.



Nature Coast Biological Station Administrative Assistant Cassandra Key stands next to some of the newest art on the walls of the second story of the NCBS. This photo on the wall is of aquaculture activity on the docks of Cedar Key in 1956. The NCBS is still being built. The third floor is not complete inside yet.

Like a living organism, the main building continues to grow as it matures. the single-story structure on the NCBS campus evolved from being part of a motel that used to occupy that part of Cedar Key.

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Four of the Seagrass Ecology Research Team were able to take a few seconds away from telling people about their studies, including a comparison of growth rates of a particular specie of crab in comparison at different locations, such as Cedar Key, Steinhatchee, other places off the Florida Gulf Coast and in other coastal states such as Louisiana. Seen here are (from left) Dr. Laura Reynolds, an assistant professor at the University of Florida, Sawyer Downey, a UF undergraduate intern, Dr. Charles Martin, assistant professor and Dr. Ashley McDonald, postdoctoral researcher. In front of the researchers are three aquariums with seagrasses and other aspects of their research. Also on the table in front of them are crabs like the kind that are among their research into growth rates of crabs at different locations along some parts of the coast of the Gulf of Mexico.

Cedar Key School
Principal Kathy
Lawrence and CKS
Science
Teacher/SALT
Teacher/Ag Teacher
and FFA Advisor
Rachel
Wetherington stand
near a display that
shows information
about the CKS
Sharks Aquaculture
Life Training
program.



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The idea of touch tanks was a relatively strong attraction for the children. Meanwhile as grandparents listened to research scientists speak about comparing crab growth rates in different parts of Florida and other Gulf Coast states, one might have noticed a point where interest faded from the person a couple of generations removed from the youngest set of visitors that day.

Regardless of the level of interest of any visitor, every person was welcomed and made to feel at home – as is the custom in the coastal community of Cedar Key. Scientists were happy to share information with every visitor who showed an interest.

Not only were higher level research scientists available to impart wisdom and sage advice, but also present was a secondary school science teacher and the top administrator from the island's public school.

While every participant was a star in his or her own right, one man shouldered the top responsibility onsite at the Nature Coast Biological Station in Cedar Key.

Dr. Mike Allen shared insight about one of the most important aspects of current research by scientists who use this site.

Dr. Allen was appointed Director of the Nature Coast Biological Station in 2015. As he mentioned in a conversation Saturday, the University of Florida has long been conducting marine research out of Cedar Key.

This is an ideal location for the research facility. Another nearby and connected research station is on Seahorse Key.

Seahorse Key is a 165-acre island located in Levy County and is part of the Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge.

That island's rich history includes thousands of years of human habitation and use. The study of shell middens on the island and surrounding region by University of Florida archeologists show that Native Americans made ample use of the area's rich estuary habitats, especially oysters and other seafood.

In addition to the connection to Seahorse Key, Dr. Allen mentioned the UF/IFAS NCBS works hand-in-hand with researchers from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

Just as the human scientists work together in this region of Florida, so too is the connection between freshwater and saltwater here.

As for some the most important research that Dr. Allen mentioned is the interrelationship of freshwater flowing into saltwater. The impact of freshwater on estuaries is among the many studies being conducted from the Nature Coast Biological Station. Changes in freshwater flow affect salinity levels in estuaries, and this environmental impact is a force to be reckoned with by the different species that make their homes in the delicate estuarian system.

Among the many other general studies at the UF/IFAS Nature Coast Biological Station at Cedar Key, Dr. Allen said, are those involving seagrasses, shorebirds, seabirds, various forms of crabs, and the aquaculture industry – including the different shellfish species like oysters and clams.

To see the archived HardisonInk.com story titled “Turtle grass reproduction research continues at Cedar Key,” click [HERE](#).

To see a UF/IFAS story about horseshoe crabs, click [HERE](#).

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Research exists, too, in relation to the land under or connected with the waters. For instance, to see a story about the rebuilding of the Long Cabbage Oyster Reef, it is currently on the bottom of the [Leisure Page](#).

Also present at the open house was United States Coast Guard Auxiliary Flotilla Commander John P. Caddigan of Flotilla 15-2 of Yankeetown.

Cmdr. Caddigan shared information about the services of the USCG Auxiliary and he was ready, willing and able as well to share with any interested person how they could become involved in this group.

Cedar Key School Principal Kathy Lawrence and CKS Science Teacher Rachel Wetherington were present to teach interest persons about the Sharks Aquaculture Life Training curriculum.

The CKS SALT began last year as an extracurricular program and began this year as a program at the school.

The class is an elective class.

Open to all juniors and seniors at CKS, this first year shows eight students enrolled. SALT Teacher Wetherington also teaches middle and high school agriculture, and sixth and seventh grade science at CKS.

SALT Students learn about the aquaculture industry, Wetherington said. These students also earn various licenses to help them in the working world of harvesting bounty from the sea.

The first license they earned this year, Wetherington said, is boating safety. These eight students are slated to earn certification in CPR and first aid within the next 30 days, she said.

Forklift training certification is on the agenda as well, she added.

Aquaculture Industry Certification from the Florida Aquaculture Association is the final goal in regard to certificate and licenses from this course, the teacher said.

There were hats and tee-shirts for sale from the UF/IFAS Nature Coast Biological Station. The open house was a wonderful success. Scientists, volunteers and teachers were excited to share with any interested person their insight about marine organisms and the habitat from whence they come.

Click [HERE](#) to see the story and photos from the opening of the facility in 2017.