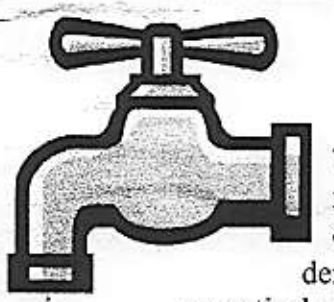
naturally speaking

Newsletter of the Calusa Nature Center and Planetarium

Summer 2000

The Center for the Study of Natural Systems



Water Talk

Susan Brookman, Executive Director

Water may well be the most precious natural resource in Southwest Florida. The manner in which we utilize and manage it affects virtually every aspect of the natural systems of this region. Because the environment is the key to much of our economy and our quality of life, it behooves all of us who live here to develop an understanding and sense of stewardship of these natural systems. It is also important that we actively participate in the discussions about their management.

The Calusa Nature Center and Planetarium worked with several agencies and organizations in June to organize and conduct a public forum about water resources in general, and the Caloosahatchee River in particular. The forum was well attended by both public and private interests, and the agencies responsible for water management were also active and enthusiastic participants. It was an important step in developing a greater understanding between stakeholders in Southwest Florida, and further efforts will undoubtedly allow us to make even more progress.

We urge our members to attend the upcoming meetings in Fort Myers (July 13th and 14th) with South Florida Water Management District officials regarding water resources. These meetings, as well as others that will be sponsored by the Calusa Nature Center and Planetarium, Caloosahatchee River Citizen's Association, US Army Corps of Engineers, and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, offer us all an opportunity to learn and to speak out on topics that concern us. We must take advantage of every opportunity we have to educate ourselves and to voice our opinions before critical decisions about how our tax dollars will be spent are made.

Costa Rica Adventure

Come join us on July 19th at 7:00 p.m. at the Center for a presentation on our upcoming trip to Costa Rica. The week-long trip is scheduled to depart on September 30th, and based on past experiences, you can count on having a wonderful time. Trip itineraries will be available at the meeting, which is open to everyone interested. A slide show featuring adventures from a previous trip will get you ready to start packing. Please call John Cassani at 694-5598 if your have questions or would like a brochure sent to you before the meeting.

Sponsored in part by the State of Florida, Department of State, Division of Cultural Affairs and the Florida Arts Council

Focus on Flora: Butterfly Larval Food Plants

Laura Wewerka, Naturalist

Since buying my home several years ago, the most fun I have had owning it has involved putting in plants to attract butterflies. Creating a butterfly garden is probably one of the simplest projects you can do in your yard; and with about 170 different species of butterflies that call our state home, you are pretty much guaranteed to attract something! The easiest part of planning a butterfly garden is putting in nectar food sources for adult butterflies. A variety of brightly colored shallow flowers, especially those that grow in clusters, are bound to bring them in! Some garden centers have special sections for butterfly plants and even supply some native plants! Of course your best bet is to head to the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation's plant nursery for the widest variety of native butterfly attractors.

The critical part of having a successful butterfly garden is providing plants on which the butterflies can lay their eggs. Many butterflies can only use one or two particular species of plants for this activity. To decide what to plant, you can take a close look around your neighborhood and identify the species found in your area. Large yellow butterflies are usually a species of sulphur – these need cassia plants. (Be careful with this one, as there is a horribly invasive species of cassia, Senna pendula, that has become a nightmare for us on our property and is occasionally sold at stores in Southwest Florida). Our state butterfly, the zebra longwing, is another easy one to identify... it is black with yellow stripes and its wings are long and thin as compared to other types of butterflies. The passion vine is its larval food plant. Julias and gulf frittilaries also use passion vine to raise their caterpillars, so it is a great choice for attracting a variety of butterflies that might be found in your neighborhood. Swallowtail butterflies, depending on the specific species, lay their eggs on some bay trees, carrots, parsley, dill, and wild lime, among other plants. You may also want to be optimistic and put in some larval food plants for rarer butterflies in our area. Several years ago I planted milkweed, and last summer I was excited to find my first monarch caterpillars munching on the leaves. I have also planted coontie, which is the larval food for the atala (a listed species) but haven't seen any caterpillars yet.

Once you have put in some larval food plants, the most important thing to remember is that you really are planting them to be eaten! Don't panic when you see those lovely green leaves full of holes and munching caterpillars. In a few weeks, your plants might look rather twiggy instead of leafy, but give them time to recuperate and they will be green and full again, ready to feed the next batch of future butterflies. In my yard I watch each year a sudden explosion of passion vine growth. This vine grows over every other plant in the garden. Last year I made the mistake of pulling out four 50 gallon trash cans full of the plant. By the middle of summer, I was literally trying to relocate hundreds of bright orange caterpillars that had hatched, eaten the measly amount of passion vine that remained, and were then searching everywhere in the yard for more! Nature often has a wonderful way of staying in balance if we just give it a chance. This year I am looking forward to another bumper crop of caterpillars to bring my passion vine back under control.

I hope I have inspired you to put a butterfly garden in your yard. To help you identify butterflies, check out the butterfly collection donated by Jack Heinrich in our Museum, or look in our gift shop, which stocks a variety of butterfly books. I also have a few papers on native Florida plants for attracting butterflies that I would be more than happy to share with you in your quest to become a butterfly gardener!

CALOOSAHATCHEE RIVER WATCH

Each of us are proud to call Southwest Florida home, and we all want intelligent decisions to be made for the betterment of our community.

There is too much badly planned development and unclear methods of environmental sustainability. We don't need to do dumb things slower we need to make a total departure and do 'Smart' things faster. We need to be clear and equitable in our policies, ambiguity and individual interpretation of land use does not serve the community.

On June 24th 2000 we cosponsored a public education seminar with the Caloosa Nature Center and Planetarium. Mr. Wayne Daltry, executive director of the Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council, gave a history of the Everglades, the people and politics that changed them. He brought in a box containing the voluminous report; Everglades Restudy', a plan we all hope restores the 'River of grass' to a more healthy state.

The plan calls for more and cleaner water to be restored to the Everglades and less being wasted by flowing out the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers into the Gulf. Wayne also noted that the plan calls for storing huge amounts of water paralleling the river that can be held in the summer and drawn down over the winter.

A point made by Wayne is that the huge price for creating impoundment lakes, pumping stations, electricity and maintenance is going to be an expensive continuing cost. He suggested the acquisition of property that is now wet be purchased and kept wet, this will require more wetland acres but the ongoing maintenance costs are minimal in comparison and more land is put into wildlife habitat, an added bonus.

What does the restudy of the Everglades mean for the Caloosahatchee River? It means less water will be flowing down the river, this is good and bad. Good because the plan calls for excessive freshwater discharges that damages the estuary to become a rare occurrence rather than a continuing problem.

Less water is also bad. The pollution and sediments that enter the river will become more concentrated as less water will be available to dilute this witch's brew. These municipal waste treatment discharges combined with the thousands of septic tanks leaching effluent into the canals and ultimately the river must be addressed now rather than wait for the inevitable crisis. Public policy makers need to be told repeatedly that keeping the river healthy and clean is important to you.