



Alabama and Florida Extension Agents Partner to Offer the Beaches to Woodlands Tour at the NACAA Annual Meeting in Mobile, Alabama

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University of Florida, IFAS Extension and Alabama Cooperative Extension agents worked to design, teach, and evaluate a program to highlight the unique ecosystems and natural and cultural history of the Northern Gulf Coast region. Field experiential learning enabled participants to gather and synthesize information, including the Florida Master Naturalist techniques and curricula, which can be incorporated into Extension programming across multiple disciplines nationwide. The 1-1/2 day event was an excursion in which attendees received instruction on the natural and cultural history of the region; led by a combination of Extension agents, private landowners, forest managers, and professional eco-tour guides. Emphasis was placed on explaining public and privately-owned natural resource management and the economic impact associated with proper planning. Participants visited a coastal barrier island, upland seepage bog, privately owned longleaf pine plantation, Mobile River Delta, and Bottle Creek Indian Mound. Fourteen (14) participants from six states attended. Seven responded to an emailed post-tour survey. One hundred percent [100% (7/7)] indicated they increased their knowledge of pitcher plants, the river delta and watershed, longleaf pine and fire ecology, Indian history, gopher tortoises, sea life, and cogongrass. Participants indicated that they have shared the information with clientele and colleagues and will integrate the new information into programming.

A group of University of Florida, IFAS Extension and Alabama Cooperative Extension agents worked to design, teach, and evaluate a program that would highlight the unique ecosystems found in southern Alabama. This program was held in conjunction with the National Association of County Agricultural Agents (NACAA) Annual Meeting, held in 2014 in Mobile, AL.

- Provide information that can be incorporated into Extension programming across multiple disciplines nationwide.
- Introduce Florida Master Naturalist skills to other Extension educators.

Educational Objectives

- Introduce ecosystems unique to the U.S. Northern Gulf Coast to Extension agents from other regions.
- Enable individuals to experience the natural and cultural history of the region.

Program Activities

The 2014 NACAA Meeting and Professional Improvement Conference, Mobile, Alabama Natural Resources Pre-Tour began as a discussion at the 2013 meeting in Charleston, SC. No Natural Resources Pre-Tour had been offered since 2002. A small but dedicated group of University of Florida, IFAS Extension and Alabama Cooperative Extension agents worked to design, teach, and evaluate a program that would highlight the unique ecosystems found in southern Alabama.

For one and one-half days, 14 NACAA members from six different states trekked along Mobile County beaches and into Baldwin County's woodlands. The tour began on Dauphin Is-

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land, learning the geomorphology of barrier islands, the impact of storm surge on these areas, and economic and environmental issues associated with the near-shore drilling for natural gas occurring in the Gulf waters of Alabama. While on Dauphin Island, the participants visited the Estuarium, an educational facility highlighting the four key habitats of coastal Alabama: the Mobile–Tensaw River Delta, Mobile Bay, the Barrier Islands, and the Northern Gulf of Mexico. It is a showcase of the plants, animals, and natural resources found in the estuary and surrounding marine habitats. Another stop on the tour included a visit to Splinter Hill Bog, a site that is occupied by some of the largest and most visually impressive white-topped pitcher plant bogs globally. Numerous rare and declining species associated with seepage wetlands, upland longleaf pine forests, and coastal blackwater streams occur within this site. Attendees visited a large, privately-owned longleaf pine plantation being actively managed for timber and pine straw production while enhancing wildlife habitat and battling destructive invasive species. Since the pitcher plants and other herbaceous vegetation native to this habitat are fire-dependent species, foresters discussed how modern forestry practices are being utilized with the traditional practice of burning to keep this ecosystem productive and economically viable. On Day Two, participants traveled by boat into the Mobile–Tensaw River Delta to experience first-hand the flora and fauna of the middle Delta’s cypress swamps. The Delta is home to Alabama’s largest baldcypress, measuring 27 ft in circumference, and a 45-ft high ancient Bottle Creek Indian Mound, built of mud and oysters more than 800 years ago. Docking at the edge of a slough, the boat Captain and First Mate delivered a historical commentary as they led the group on a quarter-mile walk through the swamp and to the top of the archaeological phenomenon, enabling Extension personnel the opportunity to see and hear the cultural history of the region.

Teaching Methods

The one- and one-half-day event was an experiential-learning style, group excursion in which attendees received instruction on the natural and cultural history of the region; led by a combination of Extension agents, private landowners, forest managers, and professional eco-tour guides. Emphasis was placed on explaining public and privately-owned natural resource management and the economic impact associated with proper planning. Extension education plays an important role in teaching the importance of

natural resource management to the health of local ecosystems. The University of Florida, IFAS Extension offers the Master Naturalist Program (FMNP) as an adult education program designed to promote the awareness, understanding, and respect of Florida’s natural world among citizens and visitors. It is based on three ecosystem-based core modules: coastal systems, freshwater systems, and upland systems; many of which are similar to other southeastern U.S. regions. Since the majority of the pre-tour leaders are Northwest Florida FMNP instructors, the FMNP field trip format, interpretive techniques and relevant curriculum were utilized for the event. Throughout the tour, the leaders offered one-on-one instruction for plant and animal identification, species interaction information and site management options. Each lecture stop included question-and-answer sessions. Instructors shared with attendees different methodologies to address various audiences, techniques to deliver concepts for diverse groups and natural resource teaching strategies that could be utilized “back home.”

Results

Fourteen (14) participants from six states attended. A post-tour survey was emailed to all attendees; seven responded. One hundred percent of the responding attendees (7/7) indicated they increased their knowledge of pitcher plants, the Mobile River delta and watershed, longleaf pine and fire ecology, local Indian history, gopher tortoises, sea life, and cogongrass.

Conclusions

Participants indicated that they have shared the newly acquired information with clientele and colleagues and will integrate the new information into programming, such as a 4-H Wildlife Habitat program. One agent who has previously attended other NACAA Pre-Tours stated that she learned so much and shared details about this event with more “folks” than any other tour.

One participant, when asked if she shared anything learned on the NACAA pre-tour, stated, “Absolutely. I’ve been talking everyone’s ears off since I got back. And even while I was there, I took a day following the conference to take another Virginia agent around the area and to Dauphin Island, and had no idea how much I had learned until I found myself reciting novels’ worth of information back to her that I had learned on the Pre-Tour. Amazing!”