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Kids enjoy a record (and fun) day with the manatees

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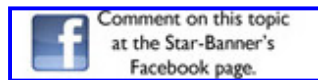
CRYSTAL RIVER -- The city of Ocala's Discovery Science Center could not have picked a better day to launch a new program, Explore Florida's Wonders.

The Wednesday outing for 12 middle-school-age students and three chaperones to swim with manatees in Kings Bay in Crystal River took place on a record-setting day.



Alan Youngblood/Staff photographer

Children in the Discovery Science Center's Explore Florida's Wonders program interact with Florida Manatee near Three Sisters Springs in Crystal River, FL on Wednesday January 19, 2011. Although it has been a little warmer the last couple of days, the water in Kings Bay remains cool so Manatee still flock to the warm spring areas. This is the first trip for the Explore Florida's Wonders program.



According to Ivan Vicente, a visitor services specialist at the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge Complex, staffers from the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge conducted an aerial survey of manatees, with 453 counted along a route stretching from the Cross Florida Barge Canal south to the Homosassa River.

That number included a record 212 manatees inside Three Sisters Springs Manatee Sanctuary in Crystal River.

Opportunities for youngsters to have outdoor educational and recreational experiences is the premise behind the science center's new program. According to center assistant Melissa Townsend, the goal is to provide opportunities on off-school days about once per quarter.

Marion County school children were off Monday for the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday and Tuesday and Wednesday for teacher in-service days.

"We want to offer recreational experiences so the students see things they wouldn't see otherwise," Townsend said.

The center made arrangements with Bird's Underwater, a dive center that offers manatee

snorkel tours, guided dives and more. As the students crowded into Bird's combination office, showroom and staging area, they received wetsuits and thus began a frenzy of wriggling and giggling.

Most found the best way to get in the suit was to recline on the carpet so as not to fall over while pulling on the snug fitting garment.

Everyone watched a video by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that gave a history of the area's many sanctuaries and outlined the rules of engagement. First and foremost: passive interaction.

The children learned that the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1983 for the protection of the endangered West Indian Manatee and preserves habitat in Kings Bay as well as natural springs that provide critical habitat each winter.

Captains Chris Senetra and Donna Apple then ushered the group onboard two pontoon boats. It wasn't planned, but the boys boarded one boat and the girls another.

As the vessels moved slowly across the bay, two dolphins herded fish in a frenzied, splashing riot of motion.

Austin Cutter, 11, who attends Ocala Springs Elementary, said he just moved here and was excited about the adventure ahead.

"We didn't have any family to have fun with in New Hampshire," he said of the move to Ocala.

At the mouth of The Keyhole, an aptly named area delineated by buoys and ropes, the boats anchored and children spilled quietly into the water.

One large manatee glided silently past, far below. A smaller one, with gnarled skin and gentle eyes, seemed to want to be with the youngsters, lingering for quite some time. In all, five manatees moved over King Spring inside The Keyhole, delighting the youngsters. So did the monster tarpon, with sunlight flashing off their bodies, along with schools of mullet and plenty of snook, snapper and sheepshead.

Senetra and Apple brought everyone back on board and cruised slowly around the bay to Three Sisters. On the way, there was a steady parade of manatees moving into and out of the bay, with huge numbers of them nuzzled against shorelines resting.

Manatees are susceptible to cold temperatures and congregate near fresh-water springs for warmth. At Three Sisters, there were numerous manatees huddled together near where currents from several springs round a natural curve.

The people gathered there were respectful and quiet, but vigilant wildlife service volunteers were on hand in kayaks in case anyone was inclined to violate the guidelines that are important to protecting the marine mammals.

Senetra, a captain for eight years and Crystal River resident for 14, said one reason she likes her job is because she feels that when people see first-hand the plight of the manatee, such as their bodies scarred by boats, they become more responsible about their care, "and become more caring people."

Kaitlynn Vitt, 13, who said she is a virtual school student and wants to be a marine biologist, said the outing was "a great experience. What we learn will help protect them for the future."

Josh Hagan, 10, a student at Eighth Street Elementary, was a little more effusive: "Now that was awesome," he said, a wide grin splitting his freckled face.

Sarah Damien, head instructor for Discovery Science Center, said it was impressive seeing so many manatees in one place.

Townsend said the Explore Florida's Wonders program would next visit Weeki Wachee for a canoe adventure and that caving was on the list as well. But on this day, it was all about the manatee and the middle schoolers clearly were in awe.

As Senetra spoke about a young female manatee whose tail had been chopped off by a boat, but who returned each winter to the bay — "wild, healthy and happy" — the children quieted in thought.

"I hope one day when you have children, you will be able to bring them to see the manatees," Senetra added.

As the pontoon boat motored slowly back to the dock, the six boys on her vessel each got to offer up one word to describe the day. They responded: "Exotic," "crazy," "fun," "awesome," "cold" and "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious!"

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