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Teachers explore environmental science at Shangri La

7/27/2009

Seventeen Southeast Texas teachers taking part in the Teaching Environmental Science summer institute at Lamar University explored environmental science last week by visiting Shangri La Botanical Gardens & Nature Center in Orange. The 14th annual summer institute, offered by Lamar University's Department of Earth and Space Sciences, gives area educators an opportunity to learn new environmental science concepts that can be integrated into their own classroom teaching.



"TES is a course for teachers and it's designed to improve their foundation in science," said Jim Westgate, TES institute director and professor of earth and space sciences at Lamar. "Many teachers only have a minimum background in science, so this is a course that gives them hands-on experience with science problems here in Southeast Texas. We focus on environmental problems and the solutions industry and government are trying to come up with using basic science to solve those environmental problems. Most of the places we take them, like Shangri La, are places they can then take their own students, and they are exposed to different opportunities. So they can design their own field trip that is appropriate for their grade level."

Tuesday's trip, which included a nature walk and boat tour, allowed participating teachers to experience the natural beauty and tranquility of Southeast Texas while enhancing their classroom curriculum. Lead by Michael Hoke, Shangri La managing director, teachers learned about the botanical and ecological landscape of the nature center and the endless learning possibilities that could be used in the classroom. Teachers also learned tips for conducting a successful field trip to the center for their own students.

"This gives teachers an opportunity to see things that are realistic to what they do in the classroom," said Roxanne Minix-Wilkins, Region 5 science director. "For example, we looked at different species of plant and animal organisms, so when teachers are in their classrooms talking about those things, they actually formed a real relationship with them."

They know it better, and if they know it better, they can relay the message to their students better."

The 10-day field institute is a graduate-level summer course made possible through grants from industry, government and nonprofit agencies. The course was developed and is taught by Westgate. Cindy Parish, a teacher at Ozen High School and adjunct instructor at Lamar, assists in teaching the class.

The Shangri La trip is one of many field excursions included in the institute so local teachers will be better equipped with the knowledge necessary to improve their science programs. Other outings included trips to the Neches River Saltwater Barrier, Trinity Bay and Texas Parks and Wildlife Coastal Fisheries research lab.

For more information about the Teaching Environmental Science summer institute, contact Westgate at (409) 880-7970.



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