

NEIGHBORS

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Pine Island ranger Rudy Beotegui teaches Vernon Quinn, 12, and Edward Becera, 11, about wildlife at the Anhinga Trail in Everglades National Park.

THE OUTSIDERS

About two dozen middle schoolers take a digital safari through Everglades National Park as part of connecting kids to the great outdoors. Page 10

MAX REED/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

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About two dozen middle schoolers camp out at Everglades National Park and learn that nature can be awesome

BY RIANNA HIDALGO
rhidalgo@MiamiHerald.com

Eliseo Rios had never been camping, unless you count his backyard in Homestead on a rainy night.

Yet two weeks ago, Eliseo, 11, joined more than 15 other middle school students in Everglades National Park as they trudged through mud, pitched their own tents and took pictures of anhingas and alligators sunbathing as part of Miami-Dade County's (MDC) new Focus on Parks program.

"We have a chance to explore something, not just watch movies," Eliseo said.

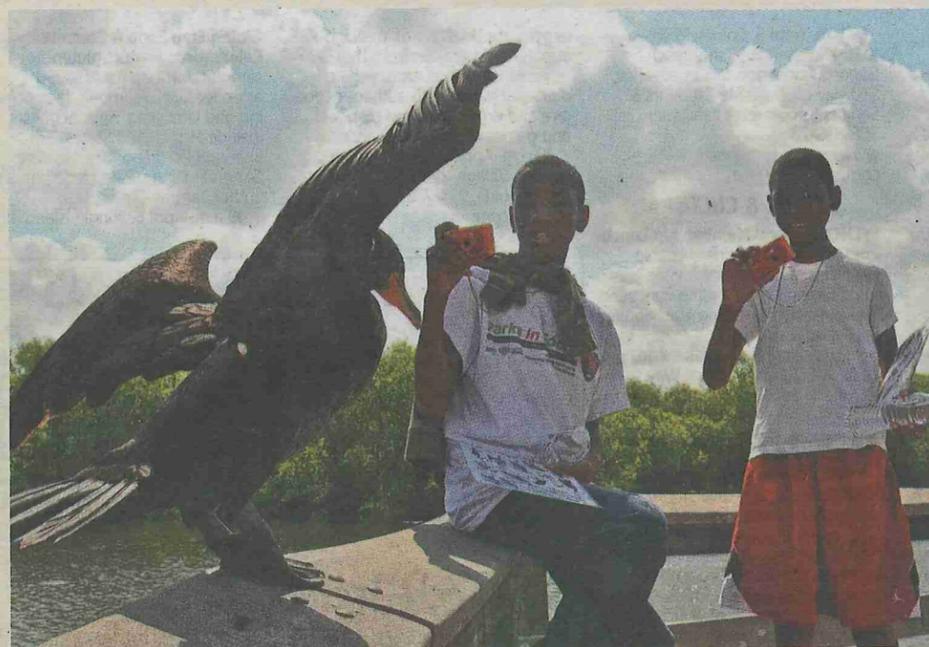
With the goal of connecting underserved youth to nature, history and culture through photography, the program consists of six excursions offered free by MDC Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces department (MDPR). The free program is open to children enrolled in the department's after-school programs.

"The idea was to get them out to parks, put a camera in their hand and let them rediscover the outdoors," said Eric Hansen, strategic recreation planner for the department. "This generation spends more time inside and tied to a television or a computer or some other social media technology, and not outside."

Some of the children have never seen the ocean or forest, or even traveled out of their neighborhood, said Jack Kardys, director of MDPR.

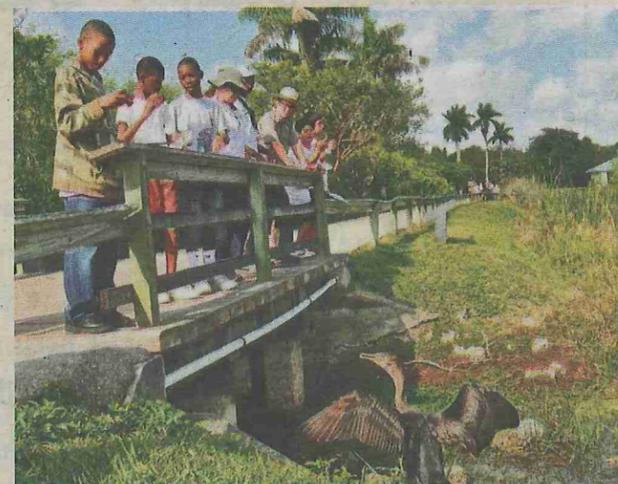
The program began in January. Since then, about 25 middle schoolers have met Saturday mornings at a designated park before venturing out for the day's events, be it boat trip down the Miami River or canoeing in Coral Gables. The program is split into two groups for the north and south areas of the county.

After a few weeks, group leader Megan Dias said she saw a few girls change their opinion of 'outdoorsy' activities.



PHOTOS BY MAX REED/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

SHUTTERBUGS: Vernon Quinn and Jovanie Ambrose, both 12, above, photograph a cormorant during a Focus on Parks program visit to the Everglades' Anhinga trail in the Everglades. Below left, other middle school students get their best shots, while below right, program guide Brandon Davis, 25, photographs an alligator.



"They didn't want to do anything," she said. "They didn't want to go hiking, canoeing, or boating. Now, they're trying to get me to take them camping."

Argelio Chaviano, a program leader who works with MDC Eco-Adventures, said the children gained more than an appreciation for the outdoors.

"We wanted to tell them a

story of Miami," he said. "They're learning — that's the whole idea. They're asking questions."

During their first few outings, the students heard about Henry Flagler and his railroad, the Indian burial site in Arch Creek Park in the northern part of the county and the lighthouse at Bill Baggs Cape Florida State Park at the end of Key Biscayne. The lighthouse

was built in 1825, reconstructed in 1846, and is the oldest standing structure in Miami-Dade County.

HistoryMiami is one of the program's partners, along with the National Park Service and the Florida Park Service. The students also received digital cameras, provided by TigerDirect.com, to document their adventures.

"Photography provides

them with a chance to stop, to take that picture, to reflect on that experience," Hansen said. "It's something tangible that they can look at and remember where they were and what it meant to them."

Their photography will be showcased in several places, starting with the first group's gallery night at 6 p.m. Friday at Gwen Cherry Park, 7090 NW 22nd Ave.

The Everglades camping trip was the sixth and final outing for the second group. The kids piled into white vans at Goulds Park in south Miami-Dade at around 8:30 a.m., clutching their cameras in Ziploc bags.

"Some of these guys were saying they've been up since 4 a.m., anxious to go," Hansen said.

The first escapade was a trek through the Anhinga Trail in Everglades National Park. Two park rangers, donning flat hats and green trousers, guided the children, pointing out the wildlife they encountered.

After reaching a viewpoint overlooking more than 30 sun-bathing alligators, Ranger Rudy Beotegui asked the kids if they were scared. His question was met with a resounding, 'No!'

"It's like a gator house party," shouted one of the boys.

The children learned the birds, who come out of the water and stand on the side of the trail with their wings spread out like a black-and-white accordion fan, were anhingas. The birds open their wings to raise their body temperatures after a swim.

Many turtles, birds and bugs later, the kids reported on their favorite moments and moved on to their campsite to eat lunch and pitch their tents.

At the campsite, 11-year-old Luz Guerrero said she discovered the value of photography.

"Some people like photographing themselves, but instead they could go out and photograph plants and nature and everything God gave us,"

she said.

Up next was slough slog-ging, a true test of a camper's willingness to get down and dirty. In the wet season, it means off-trail wading through knee or waist-high water. In the current dry season, it means mud.

Armed with bamboo poles to check for sturdiness, children yelped and laughed as their feet — not to mention legs — sank deep into the ground beneath the cypress dome.

Ranger Aracely Montero and Bleu Waters, an intern for the Greening Youth Foundation, explained the Everglades restoration efforts and instructed the children to close their eyes and use their senses to feel the difference between the park and the city.

"If we don't save this, we might not have a chance at saving the rest of our natural environments. This is a test for the rest of the world," Waters said.

The children capped off their adventure by grilling hot dogs and hamburgers, then sitting around the campfire to reflect on the program.

Ashley Arauz, 11, said she thinks the program teaches an important lesson.

"You don't want to be addicted to video games and TV. You want to go out and be in nature," she said.

Hansen said he hopes the program will continue, and would like to see it expand to include other age groups and demographics, noting that even some of the staff members are having first-time experiences.

"Although these kids may not have been exposed to this, there are a lot of people who haven't," he said. "I would want to reach more people."

At the end of each program day, Hansen has the kids fill out an exit survey and asks them to give one word describing their experience.

"It's always 'thrilling,' 'exciting,' 'awesome,' 'scary,'" he said.

EXPLORING THE EVERGLADES



Gallery Night

Photographs taken by the students of their outdoor adventures will be on display from 6 to 8 p.m. Friday at Gwen Cherry Park, NFL/Yet Center, 7090 NW 22nd Ave. The event is free.

Focus on Parks

Students have to be part of the Fit2Play after-school program to participate in the outdoor adventure program known as Focus on Parks.

What: Miami-Dade County Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces After-School & Out-of-School program: "Fit2Play: Health, Wellness and Obesity Prevention"

Who: Ages 6-14

When: 2 to 6 p.m. weekdays

Cost: Fees vary, but need-based scholarships are available.

Contact: 305-755-7800

TAKE A HIKE: Aracely Montero, Pine Island park ranger and environmental educator, guides Alma Beltran, 12, Mariela Martinez, 13, and Serenity Mainor, 11, through the Anhinga Trail at Everglades National Park.

