LOCAL&STATE

Local Earth Day event promotes clean rivers

Hays Preserve will celebrate with hike, lecture on Saturday

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The birthday of the modern environmental movement is coming up, and you're invited to the party.

On Saturday, the city-owned J.D. and Annie S. Hays Nature Preserve near Hampton Cove will mark the 34th anniversary of Earth Day with free hikes along the Flint River, games and a lecture by one of the state's most outspoken clean-water advocates.

"We want everyone to come," said Soos Weber, Hays Preserve manager and long-time organizer of Earth Day festivities in Madison County. "We eat the environment; we breathe the environment. We can't live without it."

Redstone Arsenal and NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center are also planning Earth Day-related celebrations.

The first Earth Day was April 22, 1970, when an estimated 20 million Americans took to the streets to demand a cleaner planet. The protests, organized by then-U.S. Sen. Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin, led to the creation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and passage of the federal Clean Air, Clean Water and Endangered Species acts.

Weber decided to hold this year's commemoration a week early, so it won't compete with the Panoply Arts Festival on April 23-25 at Big Spring International Park.

"Everybody's going to be downtown for that," she said.

Locally, Weber and other green-minded residents are worried about the Flint River. The once-clean waterway is considered "impaired" by the Alabama Department of Environmental Management. The culprits: leaky septic tanks, motor oil, insecticides, lawn chemicals and other suburban trash that washes into the river when it rains.

Two Flint River tributaries, Mountain Fork Creek in New Market and Yellow Bank Creek in New Hope, are polluted for a different reason: defecating cows that wade into the water to cool off, Weber said.

Dave Dieter/Huntsville Times

Soos Weber, manager of the Hays Preserve, looks at the bark of a Tupelo gum tree found at the Goldsmith-Schiffman Wildlife Sanctuary across the road from the preserve.

All the trash in the Flint dumps into the Tennessee River, which is the main source of drinking water for Huntsville, Decatur and many other cities.

The featured speaker at Saturday's event is Adam Snyder, director of the Alabama Rivers Alliance. His talk is titled, "Alabama's Rivers: The Lifeblood of our State."

Redstone Arsenal's Earth Day celebration is aimed primarily at kids.

Fourth- and fifth-graders from Huntsville and Priceville are scheduled to attend the April 22 event at the Path of Nature wetland preserve. Army employees and contractors and their families are also welcome, but not the general public.

Arsenal officials have lined up several presenters, including Redstone Garrison Commander Col. Bob Devlin, a U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service biologist, a wildlife rehabilitator and a person who carves arrowheads out of flint. The festivities run from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.

NASA will mark Earth Day on Thursday with a morning ceremony for employees. Astronaut Jan Davis will be there, and the featured speaker is Janet Herrin, who oversees 49 Tennessee Valley Authority dams and 29 hydroelectric power plants.

Radio Ecologica in Yucatan, Mexico, plans to broadcast part of the event live and interview officials from Marshall Space Flight Center and the National Space Science and Technology Center about what NASA is doing here to help the environment.

That event, which starts at 10:30 a.m. in Building 4316, is sponsored by Marshall's Environmental Excellence Team.

At a glance

Here's the schedule for Saturday's Earth Day festivities at the J.D. and Annie S. Hays Nature Preserve near Hampton Cove. The event is free and open to the public.

8:30 a.m. Bird-watching hike, led by Bill McAllister.

10 a.m. Earth Day opening

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