



Green Neighbors

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by Suzanne Thompson

Rain or shine, New London's colleges celebrated Earth Day 2009, inviting friends and neighbors to join in.



The goal of Earth Day is to raise awareness of the state of the earth's environment and cultivate an appreciation for it. Started in 1970 as a grassroots teach-in and a call to action, U.S. observances over the years have morphed with the times. Although going green is now big business, perhaps the most fitting settings for Earth Day celebrations are still on campus.

Connecticut College's Earth Fest! on Tempel Green on April 18 drew about 400 people to more than 30 displays of environmental information and products, activities for children, native plants for sale and arboretum tours, locally produced, organic, and free trade food and drink, music, and dance.

"The idea was to have a celebration of Earth," said Tyler Dunham, senior in environmental studies, one of the organizers and president of the Renewable Energy Club. One of the biggest clubs on campus, he says it has visible impact.

Through Concerts in Conservation, the club has spearheaded efforts with college administrators to reduce campus energy use. Student leaders negotiated for 25 percent of the savings to fund concerts on campus; the other 75 percent goes back to the college.

"In the past three years, we saved about \$35,000 for the college and raised almost \$10,000 for these events. It's really catalyzed the entire student body to be more aware about electricity and how much of an impact turning off the lights can have," he said.

Conn College has been a leader in environmental education and advocate for sustainability since 1969, when nationally renowned ecologists Richard H. Goodwin and William A. Niering launched the "human ecology" major. The program brings together sciences, social science, arts, and humanities on interdisciplinary approaches to environmental challenges.

"Right from the start, we were one of the first schools in the country to charge students a surcharge on tuition for renewable energy," Dunham said. For three consecutive years, the college has offset 100 percent of its electricity purchases. Students pay an extra \$25 per semester, he said, which goes to Green-e and Renewable Energy Certificates that support wind farms and other green energy production elsewhere in the country.

Regardless of their majors, all students are aware of the school's efforts to integrate sustainable practices into everyday campus life, according to Amy Cabaniss, campus environmental coordinator. These include residence hall policies, organic gardens tended by members of Sprout!, and participation in ReCycleMania, a 10-week intercollegiate recycling competition. This year, the college ranked 13th out of 510 colleges and first among enrolled New England Small College Athletic Conference schools.

For more, go to Green Living at www.conncoll.edu

Mitchell College's Biggest Earth Day Yet

Downpours didn't dampen the enthusiasm for Earth Day celebrations on April 22 at Mitchell College, which highlighted the college's commitment to community habitat restoration.

Displays and activities were set up by student groups and clubs, New London community and environmental organizations, the Science and Technology Magnet School, area businesses, and others in the Clarke Center. Nature photography and multi-media environmental art were on display and panels discussed habitat projects.

The college has launched a multi-phase, long-term project to restore its beachfront on the Thames River, reclaiming the fragile coastal ecosystem from invasive plants and human foot traffic. Partners include the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, UConn Avery Point, New London Water Authority, and state and federal environmental and conservation agencies.

Mitchell College's interdisciplinary approach to sustainability and environmentalism involves students in all fields of study, not just those working on a four-year degree in environmental studies.

Miranda Wood, a sophomore majoring in early childhood education, explained how students are removing invasive plants that are choking the dunes on Mitchell Beach and will be restoring native sea grasses.

Marine ecology students are helping the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection understand the American eel, working with the Tributary Mills Conservancy on the Tributary River in Lyme.

"We're trying to figure out the life cycle of the American eel; it's really unknown," said Amy Bernardo, a sophomore in criminal justice, who chose marine ecology as a science elective. "We know they spawn in the Sargasso Sea, basically the Bermuda Triangle. Once the larvae hit the coastal Atlantic, they begin developing into eels and start going up the tributaries."

For more about Mitchell College and its environmental initiatives, go to www.mitchell.edu.