

SECTION 5. OUTREACH AND EDUCATION

Weedon Island Preserve Cultural and Natural History Center

WIPCNHC, located at 1800 Weedon Dr NE, Saint Petersburg, opened in December 2002. The Center's purpose is to increase the public's appreciation of the value of Pinellas County environmental lands, and cultural and natural resources in general. Through exhibits, educational programs, and guided hikes, visitors can experience, discover, and better understand the connections between people and the land. The three-story Center was designed with the help of Native Americans and keeps with their traditions. For example, the orientation of the Center is along the cardinal points of the compass (north, south, east, and west) with the entrance facing east. The Center consists of office space for staff, an auditorium with seating for 85, a well-equipped classroom with seating for 30, and a large exhibit gallery. The cost of the Center was \$3.6 M and the exhibits were an additional \$2.1 M all funded by the County's CIP. The Center is open to the public Thursday, Friday and Saturday from 9:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m. and closed on all County recognized holidays.

Management of WIPCNHC is supported through the University of Florida/ IFAS, Pinellas County Extension department, which is a partnership between the County and the University. Staffing for the Center consist of one fulltime equivalent (FTE) UF/IFAS Faculty, 0.5 FTE Extension Specialist Sr. and 0.5 FTE Extension Specialist equaling two FTE total staff. Extension staff supports the Center by managing volunteers, coordinating educational programs and activities, and by building community partnerships.

Additionally, a partnership developed with FWC provides one FTE that oversees coordination of the statewide Florida Youth Conservation Centers Network program (FYCCN). FYCCN is designed to encourage and empower children to participate in traditional outdoor recreation. Experts teach them how to safely enjoy the outdoor heritage we have worked so hard to maintain. This partnership with FYCCN supports WIPCNHC by providing additional youth outdoor activities.

WIPCNHC features educational exhibits to help visitors understand natural Florida, the cultural history of the Preserve, and how people and the environment shaped each other. The exhibit gallery, "Weedon Island Preserve: Connecting People and Place," with 6,000 square feet of interactive exhibits, appeals to all ages. The interactive exhibits highlight many aspects of the history, ecology, and archaeology of the Preserve. Visitors are invited to explore the exhibits, which allow opportunities to travel underwater, through mangrove swamps, and even back in time. The gallery is free and open to the public Thursday, Friday, and Saturday from 9:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m. WIPCNHC visitation from 2003 through 2011 (Table 6) includes visitors those viewing the exhibit hall and adding programs and events.

Table 6. WIPCNHC Visitation 2003 – 2011. The WIPCNHC was open 5 days per week in 2003 through 2009, and 3 days per week in 2010 – 2011.

2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
14,151	14,235	23,338	23,206	28,281	29,896	28,387	19,445	17,132

Programming offered at the WIPCNHC include events for families, guided hikes and canoe trips, book times for preschoolers, summer camps, and general public presentations on topics such as ecology, sustainability, history, art, archaeology, and Native American culture. UF/IFAS Extension supports ongoing programs on coastal issues, climate impacts and sustainability as well as other natural resource and family programming. Special programs are held for targeted audiences such as teachers, home school educators, youth groups, government decision-makers, business professionals, and area neighborhood residents. Private and public pre-school and elementary school groups regularly visit the exhibit gallery and Preserve trails.

WIPCNHC has become a hub of activity for environmental education, marine education, cultural education, and for FYCCN. New partnerships and expanded support through FOWI and AWIARE has increased educational opportunities, supported school field trips and increased volunteer participation. Developing impactful and informative educational programs that support local issues tied to preservation of our natural and cultural resources will continue to be a focus in future years for the WIPCNHC.

Future Outreach and Education

As resources allow, PCR will continue to provide access to WIPCNHC 3 days per week from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Access for additional days will be provided if additional resources can be secured.

PCR will continue to provide for public understanding and appreciation of natural and cultural resources through exhibits, educational programs, and interpretive hikes. Monthly programs related to ecology, sustainability, history, art, archaeology, Native American culture, and other relevant topics will be provided. Additional programs and events will be provided in collaboration with FOWI, AWIARE, FYCCN, and other partners. Opportunities will continue to exist for volunteers and partners to update and distribute brochures and other publications related to the Preserve.