

The Argonaut: Top Stories

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Top Stories

Playa del Rey: Fulbright scholars will get their hands dirty at Ballona Wetlands

BY GARY WALKER

The Fulbright Program, named after the late U.S. Sen. William Fulbright, is known universally as an international educational exchange for students, scholars, scientists and artists. Forty-three Fulbright alumni have won Nobel Prizes, including two in 2010.

While they are known for their academic prowess, 45 of these program participants will soon be using their hands to pull weeds instead of handle books or laboratory equipment.

Scholars and students from around the globe will gather at the Ballona Wetlands behind Gordon's Market in Playa del Rey Saturday, Feb. 5 for an environmental enrichment initiative. They will work with volunteers from Friends of the Ballona Wetlands in a day of habitat restoration that will also include lessons about how Ballona functions and what features might be implemented during a planned state-sponsored restoration of the 600-acre ecological reserve.

"I think it's a very good opportunity for these students to get some hands-on experience in nature," Dr. Edith Read, a board member of the Friends of Ballona, told The Argonaut.

The International Visitors Council of Los Angeles will be hosting the visiting scholars. Kim Ngoc Le, senior program officer for the council, was part of a contingent that participated in similar activities sponsored by Read's organization on Earth Day last year.

"We've worked with them in the past, so we're very familiar with (Friends of the Ballona Wetlands)," Le said. "Volunteerism is part of the social fabric of life and their enrichment program focuses on environmental issues, and we thought that it would be a good fit for us."

Friends of the Ballona Wetlands Executive Director Lisa Fimiani echoed Read's belief that coming to one of the state's few remaining wetlands will allow the students and scholars a rare opportunity to perhaps witness similar conditions that are occurring in their native lands.

"It's been an interesting experience working with students from other countries," said Fimiani. "The conflicts with water features, and what to do about pollution and trash in the watershed is affecting the entire world, so it will be interesting to hear their perspectives on these issues."

Sherri Akers, the co-chair of the Mar Vista Community Council's Green Committee, is thrilled to know that international scholars will be taking part in an environmental endeavor in the local area.

"It's so exciting to hear about the Fulbright scholars that will be visiting the Ballona Wetlands. They offer a unique opportunity to see the immediate results of poor

practices," Akers said.

Proponents of the wetlands and sustainability point to last December's rainstorms and the abundance of debris and plastic bags that were found in the Ballona Wetlands, as well as in nearby Ballona Creek as proof of the need to protect the watersheds that lead to the ocean.

"The litter, debris and toxins that wash off our streets and homes in most areas end up in some distant location where we don't have to face it. The ocean waves will carry them away so we can ignore the results of what we have done," Akers noted. "With the Ballona Wetlands, we can literally walk the path that this debris travels and see its impact.

"I think it is really eye opening for people and I love that we can take pre-schoolers there to imprint the effect of their choices at an early age," continued Akers, who has been at the forefront of turning Mar Vista into one of the most environmentally conscious neighborhoods in Los Angeles. "We also have the benefit of watching the dramatic restoration that has occurred there. This is like having a science course in sustainability in our backyard - and one that's a pleasure to visit."

Fimiani said the initiative will contain an educational component as well as offer hands-on experience. "We will teach them about our specific area and show them what we're doing with our Ballona Creek watershed," the executive director explained.

The state restoration plan for the ecological reserve will also be discussed. Representatives of the state Coastal Conservancy say the large scale endeavor, arguably the largest environmental undertaking on the Westside in decades, has been pushed back until March.

"(Our organization) wants to make sure that our voices are heard before the restoration begins," Fimiani stated. "We've been involved in saving the wetlands for over 30 years, and we think that we have an inherent knowledge about how certain things function."

Read, who specializes in plant ecology and manages the Ballona Freshwater Marsh in Playa del Rey, pointed out that some of the students and scholars who are coming to Ballona are from nations that have pollution challenges similar or worse than the United States.

"Some of the developing countries around the world have higher density levels than we do," she noted. "So this will be an opportunity to have direct contact and dialogue with them to see what they are doing in their countries about some of the issues that we are facing here."

Akers would like to see the Fulbright scholars' nature experience at Ballona translate into a broader, global groundswell of sustainable alternatives.

"I hope that their visit will result in more countries implementing water capture regulations like the ones with the Low Impact Development ordinance that will be going into effect in Los Angeles," she said. "And a visit to the Ballona Wetlands makes it hard to argue about the need to ban plastic bags when you see how many are ending up there."

The habitat restoration will begin at 9 a.m. and is open to the public, at 303 Culver Blvd. in Playa del Rey.

