

Getting back to nature

School to dedicate Environmental Center April 27.

By COREY SIGGINS
FORUM STAFF WRITER

Faculty members at Eagle Ridge Magnet School in Coral Springs first came together in 1998 on a project to promote environmental education to students.

Four years later, Eagle Ridge officials will celebrate the grand opening of the school's new Environmental Center on Saturday, April 27.

The center is comprised of two parts — the Everglades Resource Center and the Outdoor Learning Environment, which is located next to Eagle Ridge at 11500 Westview Drive.

Linda Peterson, a sixth-grade teacher and sponsor for the Environmental Club at Eagle Ridge, said the goal of the center is to make students aware of plant and animal life in South Florida.

"I think the students will have a better grasp of issues related to the environment when they see it firsthand," Peterson said.

"The center takes what they've learned in the classroom and puts them in the middle of it."

Considered the first of its kind in Coral Springs, the Outdoor Learning Environment consists of five natural habitats spread over two acres.

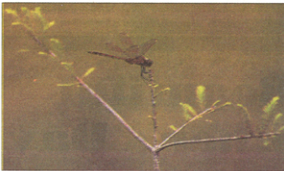
The habitats include a cypress swamp, a wetland forest and a beach/dune area. Each has its own collection of indigenous plants and animals.

Botanical Visions, a Fort Lauderdale-based company, designed the Outdoor Learning Environment and supplied the native plants that are scattered throughout the two acres.

"It took us about two years altogether to create the center. We have about four phases completed so far, and about \$1,000 in native plants in there," said Bill Reeve, president of Botanical Visions. "We have more that we want to do for this project. This is definitely a continuous process."

Teachers and students are already conducting lab experiments inside the Outdoor Learning Environment.

"One of the most popular labs centers around the ability of certain animals to camouflage themselves in



LEARNING ABOUT HABITATS: The coastal dune habitat section of the Outdoor Learning Environment, above, contains plant life such as sea grape trees, gumbo limbo trees and sea oats. At left, a dragonfly perches on a pine tree.
Staff photos/Callie Zirkle

the wild," Peterson said. "The kids find this subject pretty fascinating."

While the Outdoor Learning Environment incorporates many of

South Florida's habitats,

■ NATURE continues on 10

■ NATURE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

the Everglades Resource Center focuses on the area's most important ecosystem.

Contained within a sin-

gle classroom, the resource center acquaints visiting students with the sights, sounds and smells of the Everglades through interactive experiences.

"The Everglades are a necessary part of our environment, and our children

should know as much as possible about it," said Jan Avis, an art teacher at Eagle Ridge and the center's designer. "We want to spark their interest by using a hands-on approach."

Drawing from her back-

ground as an artist, Avis painted murals depicting the plants and animals of the Everglades on all three walls of the room. Papier-maché models of alligators, mangrove trees and other natural inhabitants can also be found there.

Along with the homemade creations, the center is a repository for books, magazines and computer programs detailing the Everglades and its impact on South Florida.

"Whatever aspect of the Everglades the student wants to know more about, chances are we'll have the appropriate resource available for him or her," Avis said.

Funding for the Eagle Ridge Environment Center was provided through the school's Advisory Council, donations from school

partners and members of the sixth-grade class, and grants from Broward Beautiful. Other groups, such as the Coral Springs Garden Club, also assisted.

"We're grateful for the help that we've received on this project in the past," Petersen said. "In the end, children should know how important the environment is to their daily lives."

The grand opening for the Environmental Center starts at 10:15 a.m. Eagle Ridge's Environmental Club students will lead tours of the center.

For more information, call Linda Petersen at (954) 796-5075.

Corey Siggins can be reached at (954) 752-7474 or by e-mail at csiggins@tribune.com.
