



Outdoor Ecology 101: Students work together to improve Rock Spring Park

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ALTON - Various local organizations joined together Friday to help the local ecology of **Rock Spring Park**.

Through initiatives to remove invasive species and decrease erosion from surges of water during storms, representatives of **Rock Spring 2020**, the **Sierra Club**, **Lewis and Clark Community College** and **Alton Middle School** worked together in a sort of outdoor classroom. Students from the middle school worked to remove invasive bush honeysuckle, while members of **YouthBuild** and the Restoration Ecology program at LCCC built a bioswale.

Jeff Sherwood, a Restoration Ecology student who designed the project, said a bioswale is a natural implementation, which promises to remove the negative impact of storm surges. Bioswales do this by slowing the pace at which water from storms reaches nearby water sources. This project specifically benefited the ecology of **Rock Spring Creek**.

"It does several things," Sherwood said. "Its main function is to reduce storm water surge."

Sherwood said those surges rush from the paved areas around Alton Middle School down a hill bordering the park, and eventually finds its way into the creek. During those surges, the creek floods and recedes, causing significant erosion and pollution, which eventually runs into the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico.

The bioswale features several small trenches, which act as natural streams would. Dirt taken to carve those small tributaries is stacked around the bioswale like a small berm, to retain water. Sherwood said the same amount of water will eventually reach the creek, but the bioswale will slow its progress to ensure the deluge is maintainable.

To further prevent rapid rushes of water into the creek, the bioswale's grass will be replaced by native grasses and plants. Sherwood said those plants will reduce the amount of water going to the creek.

"It will take several years for these plants to grow and fully mature," Sherwood said. "That will be when the bioswale is fully effective. I really like this park too. I want to bring my kids here someday to see it."

LCCC Restoration Ecology Director **Scott Moss** said such projects are what he wants his students to create. Sherwood developed the bioswale project as the completion of his internship with Moss.

"Our program takes degraded ecosystems and returns them to their natural ecology," he said. "Everything green here doesn't belong. Bush honeysuckle was an invasive species brought by the **Department of Conservation** to prevent erosion. It pushes out all species that should be here."

Those bush honeysuckle plants were being eradicated by 7th grade science students under the supervision of middle school science teacher **Sig Utgaard**. Utgaard is a member of the Rock Spring 2020 group, and has been utilizing the hillside bordering the park and school as a sort of outdoor classroom.

"I am trying to make a more usable outdoor classroom," he said. "The school is taking responsibility of the park's border."

Rock Spring 2020 is a branch of Drug Free Alton. They are dedicated to improving Rock Spring Park to make it more enjoyable for the citizens of Alton. According to member, Sandy Crawford, the group has been bettering the park for more than three years.

"We have been working on revitalizing the under-utilized park, and the middle school has adopted it for cleanup and restoration as well," Crawford said during a break from cleaning the waterfall at the entrance to the park. "We work very closely with the City of Alton, so we do not duplicate our efforts. The park and rec department works very closely with Rock Spring 2020."

Also working closely with Rock Spring 2020 is the Sierra Club. **Three Rivers Project Co-Chair Virginia Woulfe-Beile** said the Sierra Club has been working closely with Rock Spring 2020 since the initiative to restore the park's waterfall. She said a return to planting native species needs to occur among gardeners and retailers.

"The planting of invasive species like bush honeysuckle is a misguided attempt to solve problems," she said.

She added the City of Alton has been very helpful with the initiative to improve the park. Future additions may include a nature trail along the hill lined with edible plants for foragers. Woulfe-Beile said such plants would ideally be accompanied by informational signage detailing information about the plants. She said Rock Spring 2020 has applied for grants for such projects and are awaiting their status.

