



COURTESY FOREST HILL H.S.

Beach-y Keen: Bahamas-bound Academy students (top) Rebecca Kootz, (from left) Leslie Rothenburg, Yadira Catana, and Lorraine Douglas collect data at low tide.

Getting Down and Dirty

Students save the planet and make the grade

By Lindsay Downey

Exploring ecosystems in the Bahamas. Constructing an artificial reef. Working with state-of-the-art Hydrolab equipment.

It sounds like the work of top marine biologists, but it's all part of a typical school year for students in the **Academy of Environmental Science and Technology** at **Forest Hill High School** in West Palm Beach. Not many high school students can say they've not only read about environmental problems but have actually worked hands-on in exotic locales like the Bahamas.

"Students in this program gain a true appreciation and understanding of the role they play in the environment as they personally explore the ecosystems of South Florida," says Sasha Linsin, the program's science facilitator.

The Academy uses environmental themes to incorporate all of the required curriculum like English and social studies. Students in grades 9 through 12 share a classroom equipped with labs and computer kiosks where they research scientific journals and ecological issues on the internet. The emphasis the program places on internet literacy and research will put them miles ahead of their peers when they begin college. After studying in the Academy, the students are time-budgeting pros, self-sufficient in completing work on their own.

"This classroom functions as an office space in which the students are employed.

Their job is to complete their tasks in a professional manner and on time," Linsin says.

Most high school students take an occasional field trip to apply the skills they've learned in the classroom, but the Academy students are consistently involved in field studies. Who says you can't work on your tan and learn at the same time? In July 2003, Academy students broke out their bikinis and sunglasses for a once-in-a-lifetime adventure in the Bahamas. Ten juniors and seniors and two teachers from the Academy were invited to participate in a five-day field study on Lee Stocking Island in the Bahamas, funded by the Perry Marine Institute and the Friends of the Environmental Academy. They spent the trip exploring the island and snorkeling at Norman's Pond Cay and various caves. They also studied data collected by the environmental monitoring buoy, the *RV Kristina*. The students worked alongside scientists on the island and conducted fish and spiny lobster surveys on reefs they visited. Research doesn't seem like work when you're having a blast basking in the warm rays of the Bahamas.

"Meeting and interacting with the researchers, being able to get into the raw research made it much more interesting and expanded my horizons," says Matt Botts, a junior.

Say the word "Envirothon" to students in the Academy, and their ears perk right

up. They get geared up each year and dedicate tons of energy to preparing for the Palm Beach County Envirothon. The competition is a field-oriented program where students work in teams of five to solve written questions and investigate problems hands-on. The Academy students always have an edge over competing schools, having gained experience during the course of the year in various field studies.

The topic of the 2002 Envirothon was "Introduced Species and Their Effect on Biodiversity." The students developed a mission statement for the project: "To help inform the community on the increasing rate of pet abandonment." In 2001, they created brochures and coloring books that they placed in sanctuaries and animal shelters. Their desire to inform the public on the matter broadened in 2002 to include a web site so people from all over the world can learn about pet abandonment. A Envirothon group of six students in the Academy, who called themselves "Team Falcon," produced a video on the issue. They recorded it while educating children on the responsibilities of owning pets at **Washington Elementary School** in Riviera Beach. That team won 2nd place in the 2002 Envirothon competition.

"Being so steadily involved with the Envirothon and the Environment Academy has prepared me to be successful on my own," says Rebecca Kootz, a junior. "Getting out and conducting research has made me more independent, boosting my leadership skills to an all-time high."

The Academy even received two U.S. Geological Survey scholarships for a student and science facilitator to attend the 2003 Greater Everglades Ecosystem Restoration Conference. Junior Jessica Teets represented the Academy with Linsin.

"It was exciting to attend discussions on current issues and research. It made me realize that one day I'll be presenting my own research to a group of scientists who are interested in what I've discovered," Teets says.

Graduates of the Academy leave the program equipped with real-world research experience to propel them to the top of their college classes. Through the program, they're transformed into confident leaders who have no qualms about getting involved with environmental organizations and research studies at the university level. The unique curriculum and field work provide students with an opportunity to see first-hand exactly how their education will prove useful in future careers.

The members of the Academy aren't just students. They're mentors to each other and the community. They're scientists, researching ecological issues and exploring the physical environment around them. Most importantly, they're accomplished leaders setting the standard for high school students everywhere. 🐬

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Learn more about "getting green" at the Academy at www.floridaleader.com