

# University of Florida College of Business Students Lend Alachua County Forever's Sweetwater Preserve a Helping Hand

- Kevin Ratkus, ACF Environmental Specialist

UF freshman in the College of Business enrolled in the summer Warrington Welcome class assisted Alachua County Forever (ACF) land managers with the maintenance of Sweetwater Preserve. On the morning of Saturday July 25<sup>th</sup> twenty students were divided into two working groups so they were either knee deep in water cleaning trash from Sweetwater Branch or in the floodplain forest removing non-native invasive air potato plants.

Because this was the student's first semester attending UF, this event was for many, their first exposure to a natural area in Alachua County. These events are a win/win activity: the students are introduced to the local ecology and some environmental issues, while the ACF program gains needed assistance managing its preserves.

## Invasive Plant Control:

It takes years of effort to remove invasive species from natural areas using a combination of



Photo 1: UF College of Business students remove Air Potato plants & tubers

selective herbicide treatment, manual removal and public education.

Business students that worked with ACF's Sandra Vardaman learned some of air potato's history, identification techniques and how it is best removed from natural areas. They pulled up the plants by the tuber and disposed of them in bags. Air potato is native to tropical Asia, but was introduced to the America's via Africa through the slave trade. It was first introduced to Florida in

1905 and has become one of Florida's most invasive plants

because it grows so quickly and out competes many of our native plants.

## Cleaning Urban Creeks:

Since the upper section of Sweetwater Branch flows through downtown Gainesville it acquires a lot of trash that eventually makes it to Sweetwater Preserve and Paynes Prairie which are downstream. The students working with ACF's Kevin Ratkus waded through the water to collect 500 pounds of trash and several car tires from the creek section within the preserve's boundary. It was the largest quantity of trash collected in July's creek & river clean-ups

organized by Current Problems Inc. for UF's College of Business. The City of Gainesville has installed a few trash traps in the stormwater drains to reduce trash getting in the urban creeks, but littering is still too common for these traps to eliminate waste into our surface waters. While removing trash the students learned about water quality issues, freshwater ecosystems and regional efforts to protect our local water resources.



**Photo 2: UF College of Business students remove trash from Sweetwater Branch**

Events like this are already scheduled for the students enrolled in the fall term Warrington Welcome class, thus keeping ACF Preserves in good condition and exposing incoming students to natural areas and issues in their new hometown. Alachua County Photo 1: UF College of Business students remove Air Potato plants & tubers

Forever appreciates the assistance that neighbors, friends and students donate to the County Preserves.

Photo 2: UF College of Business students remove trash from Sweetwater Branch

Alachua County Forever

<http://www.alachuacounty.us/government/depts/epd/land/>

Current Problems Inc.

<http://www.currentproblems.org/>

Alachua County: Water Resources

<http://www.alachuacounty.us/government/depts/epd/waterquality/>

Invasive Plant: Air Potato

<http://aquat1.ifas.ufl.edu/node/133>