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## Florida focuses on saving natural springs

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CRYSTAL SPRINGS, Fla. (AP) - For a city kid, Guy Axelrod was pretty good with the hand net he used to catch tiny critters as he waded downstream from Crystal Springs.

The spring served that day as an outdoor botany lab for 80 high school students as well as the source of 40 million gallons a day of some of the nation's purest water.

"I never knew there were this kind of rivers in the state," said Axelrod, an 18-year-old senior at Orlando's Olympic High School. "It's a better way of learning, for sure: It's amazing how much more you learn when you're enjoying yourself."

Crystal Springs, once a popular local swimming hole and picnic spot 33 miles from Tampa, is now off-limits to all but those studying its fragile ecology - or officials of the Nestle SA company, which sells some of the bottled water under labels such as Zephyrhills or Deer Park.

Horror stories abound about Florida's natural springs, some of which have turned from cool bastions of idyllic beauty into victims of such severe ecological damage that they're facing extinction.

Some remain lush with water but have descended into weedy neglect. Others are going dry from drought, overpumping or urban development. Some are so polluted that they would sicken swimmers.

Crystal Springs Preserve Inc., located in southeastern Pasco County, is a 525-acre educational facility designed to present one of Florida's most unique natural treasures to those who otherwise might never see it.

"The preserve is designed as a living laboratory for everybody from kindergartners

through Ph.D's," director Karen Pate said. "We're teaching them Florida natural resources are very precious, and that keeping them in a natural state helps cope with development pressures."

Of the state's 720 identified springs, most of which are located in north and central Florida, the vast majority are in danger, said Jim Stevenson, a member of a statewide task force charged with protecting and restoring the complex system of springs.

"Growth is the problem: The more people, the more pollution," he said. "Most of what is being done is done out of ignorance, and people, once they understand how these systems work, they're willing to alter their acts."

For example, Florida State University researchers say Sulphur Spring could be a "poster child for Florida's diseased springs."

Two generations ago, locals and tourists flocked to swim in the crystal-clear waters. In recent years, it has fallen victim to urban development that destroyed nearby wetlands, said Gordon Leslie, a geologist with the Hillsborough County Environmental Protection Agency.

Before scientists were able to discover the connection between the spring and its network of nearby sinkholes, builders had used them as drains for water, trash and construction debris.

Now stripped of its shady grace, the spring is a murky greenish color, and so severely polluted that the city built a new concrete swimming pool directly beside it to accommodate swimmers.

Gordon said the City of Tampa is trying to correct some of the causes of Sulphur Spring's distress, such as building stormwater ponds to filter urban runoff and unclogging sinkholes so they might resume their role as conduits for clean rainwater.

Also, the state's \$2.5 million Florida Springs Initiative has concentrated on rehabilitating troubled springs. Mike Bascom, the chairman of the task force, said local involvement is key.

"Whole lives of families grew up around the springs. It's an important piece of their history," Bascom said. "Once you lose that, it doesn't come back."

In 2002, the state provided money for a restoration project at Fanning Springs in Levy County, which showed declining water quality.

Too much foot traffic took its toll, eroding native plants that anchor soil to the shoreline, said Sally Lieb, who supervised the restoration project.

The solution: Build a boardwalk to keep foot traffic away from the water's edge, remove tons of sediment from the spring and replant damaged vegetation. The park also has added improved septic systems to keep restroom waste from polluting the spring.

Officials believe improvement costs - more than \$375,000 - were worth it to protect an important environmental and economic resource.

More drastic measures were needed at Crystal Springs. Most of its water flows into the nearby Hillsborough River, Tampa's primary water supply. And, for decades, Crystal Springs Park was a popular swimming spot open to the public. But, in 1996, its owners closed the spring to swimmers, citing overuse.

"So many people came here for picnicking and swimming - 1,000 to 3,000 at a time - leaving trash, trampling plants," Pate said. "We thought the best use of the property would be to switch to environmental education."

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