

MAN-MADE FLOATING ISLANDS

Installed to protect fish test new treatment method

BY NATASHA LINDSTROM
STAFF WRITER / Daily Press

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APPLE VALLEY

• Students with the Academy for Academic Excellence have latched onto an innovative way to protect endangered species, cleanse local ponds and possibly treat wastewater: floating islands.

“We’re meeting a couple of needs with one technology,” Matthew Huffine, middle and high school science teacher at the Academy’s Mojave River campus, said.

Floating islands describe man-made wetlands — buoyant mats which are planted like gardens and launched onto waterways — that mimic natural floating wetland systems. A growing ecofriendly trend that’s evolved over the past decade, the islands are comprised of recycled plastics woven into what looks like a thick loofah, buoyant foam, burlap fabric, soil and plants.

Roughly 50 students spent Saturday planting and installing the floating islands in the man-made Deep and Tui Slough ponds, which were built near the Lewis Center for Educational Research in 2008 as refuges for the endangered Mohave tui chub fish. They’re hoping the islands, anchored by concrete poles, will provide cover for the endangered fish, create a habitat for turtles and other wildlife and naturally cleanse the ponds.

The effort is sponsored by both the Mojave Water Agency and Victor Valley Wastewater Reclamation Authority, with material contributions by Sean Dempsey of the vendor Floating Islands West.

“We’re hoping to get rid of the algae as a result of the islands ... and that would be indicator to VVWRA that this might be a low-cost, earthfriendly way of removing nutrients from tertiary water,” Huffine said.

VVWRA officials plan on measuring the nitrate levels of the ponds to gauge the islands’ impact, according to Huffine.

“Some students from other schools have used this technology to test the ability to neutralize pharmaceuticals that are commonly found in urban wastewater,” he added.

Students in Huffine’s conservation class have been preparing for the event since early fall.

“We’re all very hands on when it comes to learning about the environment,” student Jessica Leming, 17, said. “I think by doing this ourselves we really feel a deep connection to the wildlife we have here.”

The islands will also give students and researchers a chance to study the Mohave tui chub fish through underwater cameras streamed online, so “the kids can actually capture images of the fish being fish.”

“When it’s a shy water living critter, the only way you can capture that is through remote photography,” Huffine said.

And cleaner water would make the ponds safer for other Mojave River animals, such as the Western pond turtles. Though they’re not endangered, Huffine said with the shift from overwhelming floods to dry spells, river animals “in the desert need all the habitat they can get.”

Natasha Lindstrom may be reached at (760) 951-6232 or at nlindstrom@VVDailyPress.com.

UP CLOSE:

Sean Dempsey of Floating Islands West holds a piece of one of the floating islands that was removed to make way for a plant.

Photo by MATTHEW NABORS, Daily Press



PHOTOS BY MATTHEW NABORS, FOR THE DAILY PRESS

ISLAND HOPPING: Sean Dempsey of Floating Islands West stands atop one of the new floating islands installed in ponds behind the Lewis Center for Educational Research on Saturday morning. Students planted vegetation on the islands that is native to the area and will help clean the water that is in the ponds.





MATTHEW NABORS, FOR THE DAILY PRESS

SURFACING: Student Drew Mckinney surfaces from underneath one of the new floating islands installed in ponds behind the Lewis Center for Educational Research as Sean Dempsey of Floating Islands West holds onto it on Saturday morning.

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