Connecting the Community with the Indian River Lagoon through Public Education

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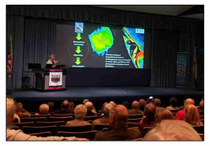
Outreach and Engagement at FAU Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute

The Importance of Science Outreach:

Outreach efforts are valuable for emphasizing the importance of scientific endeavors and bridging the gap between researchers and the general public. Improved environmental literacy can also positively impact conservation practices within a community.



Mission Ocean Discovery:

The FAU Harbor Branch outreach team is dedicated to sharing the institute's research and important ocean topics with diverse audiences through a variety of efforts. Over the last year, we have incorporated the following new initiatives to broaden our reach.

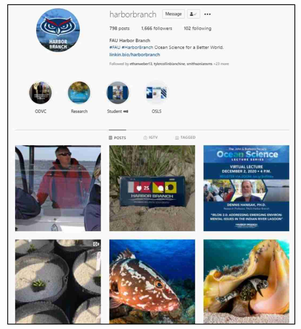
IRL Graduate Research Fellowship:

Since 2014, the Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute Foundation has supported the critical research conducted by FAU Harbor Branch students through the Indian River Lagoon (IRL) Graduate Research Fellowship program, including the projects featured on this poster.

Project 1: Social Media

Background:

The array of social media platforms available today provide many opportunities to engage and directly communicate with members of the general public. As of January 2020, records show that over 3.8 billion people around the world used at least one social media account and that 71% of Americans rely on these channels as their primary source for news. For years, FAU Harbor Branch has maintained Facebook, Instagram and Twitter accounts, and regularly shares information about the Institute.



Project Objective:

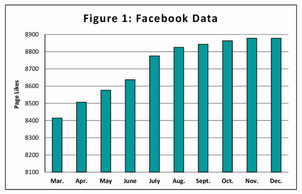
Educate the public about the marine ecosystems, FAU Harbor Branch research and outreach initiatives via content shared on social media.

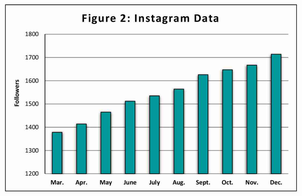
Methods:

In order to expand upon existing efforts, we assisted with content development and the creation of posts from March to December of 2020. Posts covered an array of topics including facts about the IRL and wildlife, findings from research projects and spotlights on graduate students as well as promotional posts to highlight our newest virtual resources (behind the scenes tours, presentations from scientists and educational videos) and eco-friendly and ocean-themed items for sale in our new online gift shop.

Results and Future Directions:

Throughout this time, social media engagement increased with a total of 464 additional page "likes" on Facebook and 336 new followers on Instagram (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2). On average, posts that highlighted graduate student research or information about marine animals received the most engagement. Generating interest in these topics can inspire future researchers, lead to the recruitment of new students and improve ocean literacy among followers world-wide. We will continue find new and creative ways to deliver our messaging via these valuable platforms.





Conclusions:

Social media is a useful tool that can compliment traditional in-person outreach. These channels also allowed us to continue public engagement during COVID-19 closures.

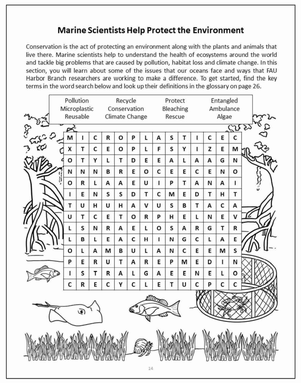
Project 2: Activity Book

Background:

Hands-on activities are an established method used to educate children in a fun, informal way while encouraging their interests. Such efforts play an important role in inspiring the next generation of scientists, educators, resource managers, ocean leaders and environmental stewards. Further, educational materials that can be distributed are a valuable tool for sharing information with and engaging broader audiences.

Project Objective:

Create an activity book for children (ages eight to twelve) to educate them about marine science and research happening at FAU Harbor Branch.

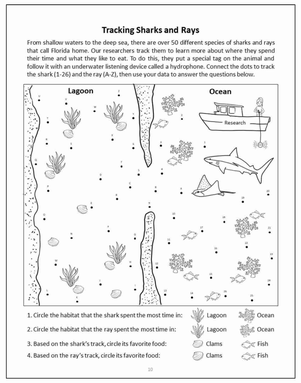


Methods:

Educational content was developed to highlight a wide array of topics, including those specific to the IRL, like how researchers track sharks, monitor water quality, survey seagrass beds and rescue injured dolphins. To present this information in a fun and engaging way, concepts were incorporated into a variety of activities including word searches, coloring pages, mazes, fill-in-the-blank vocabulary exercises and connect-the-dot puzzles. Illustrations were also created to compliment each activity.

Results and Future Directions:

Over the fall 2020 semester, we developed original content for a total of 32 pages. The book was organized into four themed chapters which highlight ways that researchers explore marine habitats, study animals, protect the environment and help people. Our goal is to complete the remaining content over the coming months so that the book can be released during FAU Harbor Branch's 50th Anniversary celebration, which begins in the fall of 2021. Once printed, the activity book will be widely distributed with the help of school districts and partner organizations.



Conclusions:

This project provides an opportunity to reach new audiences and inspire children to pursue a career in marine science.

Project 3: Research-Themed Display

Background:

The Ocean Discovery Visitors Center is a public destination that showcases the research conducted at FAU Harbor Branch. It serves as a resource for the community and is visited by over 5,000 people each year. The center currently houses five educational exhibits which correspond with the Institute's various research departments. The Marine Ecosystem Health exhibit highlights diverse environments, resident wildlife, human impacts and conservation efforts.

Project Objective:

Establish a new display at the Ocean Discovery Visitors Center that will educate the public about sea turtles, threats to local populations and the important work that is being conducted by researchers at FAU Harbor Branch.

Methods:

Recent findings from FAU Harbor Branch health assessments have revealed that sea turtles living in the IRL are impacted by several issues including seagrass loss and disease as well as the accumulation of algal toxins and contaminants. We worked closely with researchers to translate this scientific information so that it could be easily understood by general audiences then incorporated it into our display.

Results and Future Directions:

The new display includes a large printed overview sign, as well as a touch-screen computer with an interactive module that allows guests to dive deeper into these topics. This module will continue to be updated to incorporate information about new research projects and findings.

Conclusions:

The content for this display was completed in December of 2020 and the installation will occur over the coming months. We look forward to sharing it with future visitors.

We thank the Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute Foundation for funding this work. For more information about FAU Harbor Branch outreach programs please visit www.fau.edu/hboi

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