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Big turnout for Earth Day cleans up Pacifica

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More than 8,000 people participated in one way or another in Pacifica Beach Coalition's Earth Day Saturday to clean up Pacifica and to spread awareness about ongoing environmental pitfalls. This year's theme "Be Turtley Cool, Take Action" focused on the sea turtle. The morning clean-ups ended with a festive program at Linda Mar State Beach attended by legislative representatives and turtle experts. Entertainers performed while local non-profits offered arts and crafts projects for kids and educational opportunities for everyone.

Last week in school assemblies, students learned about sea turtles from marine biologist Chris Pincetich of the Sea Turtle Restoration Project. They learned about protecting those species that are endangered and about how to avoid using materials, such as plastic, that end up in the ocean and may cause harm. Students were also encouraged to write to state legislators to have the sea turtle declared the official state reptile. On Saturday at Terra Nova High School, where 200 students were hard at work (the extra credit points helped), student body president Jeff Arnaudo presented biologist Wallace J. Nichols with signed petitions from 100 students and letters seeking to have the sea turtle declared California's state reptile.

Earth Day organizer Lynn Adams and Nichols joined Pacifica Mayor Pete De Jarnatt and County Supervisor Don Horsley to address the group working at Terra Nova on Saturday. Adams told the students these guests were champions in environmental causes in the public arena -- De Jarnatt was the first council member to support the present Earth Day event, Horsley, who has introduced a plastic bag ban in San Mateo County. Nichols is a sea turtle champion around the world

Last week, more than 5000 students from every school in Pacifica engaged in activities that ranged from garden plantings and weeding to schoolwide, neighborhood, creek and beach clean-ups. Some painted store windows that showed colorful sea turtles and sea scenes in Eureka Square.

On Saturday, the activities culminated into a grand effort that literally touched every neighborhood, every park and every beach. Adams counted 125 community groups, 110 businesses and 13 schools involved in one way or another. Many came from other communities where there are no organized Earth Day activities. A few said it was harder to get the ball rolling in other communities to establish the effort apparent in Pacifica. D.J. Canepa, City Council member in Daly City, worked with volunteers to clean the Mission Street top-of-the-hill area.

"There was a lot of trash," he said. "It woke me up about how the trash accumulates in that area."

Adams organized the first Earth Day in Pacifica to extend its focus beyond the beaches in 2005. That first year she had 150 people representing six community groups who cleaned areas inland from the beaches. Now the event has grown into something that involves more people than just Pacificans and much more than beach clean-ups.

"This is the biggest I have ever seen it," said long time Earth Day volunteer Penny Keating.

Scout troops cleaned up the skatepark and surrounding marshland. Middle school students from Burlingame restored habitat at Linda Mar State Beach. The 4-H Million Trees Projects planted 15 trees at Terra Nova along the football field and 10 more at Westmoor High School.

The Rickson family cleaned up the debris on Fassler Ave, which has traditionally received a heavy dose of trash. City workers, who volunteered on Earth Day, set up orange traffic cones on streets to

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protect those picking up trash and pulling weeds on city streets. Other city workers helped setup and protect the celebration site, drive dignitaries, and provide supplies as needed.

After a morning of hard work, volunteers came to a celebration at Linda Mar Beach and a program emceed by Pedro Point Surf Club President Greg Cochran. The weather was gorgeous with warm sun and no wind. By the end of the day, the beach was crowded with people from all over the Bay Area sharing the beauty of Pacifica.

Mayor de Jarnatt addressed the crowd and the Pacifica Beach Coalition members to remark on their all-out effort.

"Your enthusiasm is contagious," he said.

State Assembly Member Jerry Hill said he was so happy to be in sunny Pacifica, protecting six miles of beaches in a zero waste event.

"We should all be practicing this every day," he said.

He spoke of how it was important to save sea turtles, especially those species that are endangered. He said how it saddens him to no end when he sees a bird with a piece of plastic stuck in its mouth. Hill introduced two Terra Nova students, Emily Williams and Jeremy Peschard, whose work

cleaning up San Pedro Creek inspired many others to roll up their sleeves and clean it up. Students and adult volunteers saw for themselves how fragile the Steelhead habitat is and how trashed the creek gets from time to time.

Peschard said, "We are helping those who have no voice. Our job never ends. Our world is all connected. The way we have been doing things must change."

"We got so much trash at the first cleanup of San Pedro Creek; it would have filled a classroom," Williams said. "Because of my work with the Pacifica Beach Coalition, I have changed my career goals. I will major in sustainability management at Johnson and Wales."

Hill presented the students with proclamations of appreciation from the State Assembly. Adams presented them with Star of the Sea awards from the Pacifica Beach Coalition and sent Hill home with an Earth Day poster signed by many of the volunteers.

Congresswoman Jackie Speier addressed the group. She called the sea turtle the "canary in the coal mine," which is the first to perish from a toxic environment. She explained the history of Earth Day and its inception in 1970.

"Earth Day is a day to express our appreciation for our planet and demand its protection. For 42 years, citizens have made their voices heard, demanded change and volunteered to make Earth a cleaner and safer home for all of us. Please do your part today.

In 1970, Gaylord Nelson, a Democratic Senator from Wisconsin, and Pete McCloskey, a Republican Congressman from California, co-founded Earth Day with the idea to combine the energy of the anti-war movement with the public awareness about pollution. On April 22 that year 20 million Americans took to the streets in protest of air and water pollution that was making them sick and killing them. The country was ripe for environmental protection and regulation. In the early 70's, some of the toughest laws in the U.S. were passed, including the National Environmental Policy Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act. They were signed into law by Richard Nixon, the Republican president.

The environmental laws have protected us and our most treasured places for decades and we need to recommit ourselves to keeping these protections in place. Our air and water quality have improved since the first Earth Day, but we are facing no shortage of environmental challenges -- chemical and agricultural pollution, ocean pollution and acidification, mountain top removal, oil spills, climate change, the list goes on."

Speier presented two Star of the Sea awards to groups -- Social Vocational Group of San Mateo and HOPE Services -- who have brought groups of clients to clean up Pacifica's beaches and coastal parking lots every week for years, not just on Earth Day.

At the celebration, the Pacifica Gardens sold small pots of vegetable plants for home use. The Pacifica Library Foundation invited all to give input about what their ideal library/media center would be. The Pacifica Historical Society kept visitors up to date on events and restoration projects.

Among the groups offering educational materials at Earth Day, the Marine Mammal Center offered materials, the National Park Service offered information, Recology of the Coast had handouts about reducing waste. Kids made art out of bottle caps. The Pacifica Beach Coalition had a bag of

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collected trash from high tide one day at Linda Mar beach. It was small broken bits of plastic pieces, cigarette butts, styrofoam, and wrappers that looked like about three gallons worth of trash.

"We have positive momentum locally, which is good, because the habitat is critical," Chris Pincetich, of the Sea Turtle Restoration, said. "Out in the Gulf of Mexico the fishing trolls are still killing hundreds of turtles a year."

When Pincetich took the podium to address the crowd, he encouraged everyone to continue to clean beaches and streets and to change the type of seafood they purchase to those on an approved list where overfishing or poor fishing practices has not nearly decimated the species. He had many ideas to practice that will help the environment.

"Hundreds of sea birds and turtles are killed in a fishing line stretched 50 miles long," he said. "The use of the drift gillnets in California is still a problem. It's still legal to have them out one mile long. We are working to clean up sea turtle beaches around the world. They can't digest plastic. We are finding little bits of plastic even in the fish we eat. Get a reusable water bottle. Use reusable bags. Get the offshore oil companies to own up to the damage they are doing to sea turtles. Make small changes that really add up."

Dr. Wallace J. Nichols, the keynote speaker, noted that with the number of participants in Pacifica representing 20 percent of the population, is a good sign for the future of environmental actions in Pacifica. He shared his "blue marble" campaign and passed around blue marbles to the crowd. He said to envision that each blue marble is teeming with sea life, 200-300 organisms, as it would if it were in the ocean.

He said to give the marble away to someone remarkable, to thank someone, as a message of gratitude. He passed his own blue marble on to Lynn Adams for all the work she did in Pacifica to organize Earth Day.

"People have fought to protect our ocean and coastline for us," he said. "We are working on the edge of the ocean, but still have a chance to see what we are doing right. There are people who pick up trash. You have changed the way they do things. Everything you do matters."

Adams thanked him for turning turtle poachers into turtle scientists. She then introduced the second to last speaker of the day, Pacifica Beach Coalition member Cindy Abbott, whose efforts coordinating the celebration were so thoughtful and organized, the day was pleasant and educational for all. She gave the winners of the window painting contest their awards, by age group, for the best artwork and message. One window said, "I hate trash and I love turtles," another drew a picture depicting the importance of trees to maintain clean air. The grand prize winner had drawn a picture of a turtle crying.

Adams closed the presentations by giving her own speech about the power of bringing so many people together to champion a cause. She broke into tears as she described Pacifica as a city united for the turtles.

"We have rivers of plastic flowing to them. Our mission is to help other people know this," she said.

More Earth Day photos on Page 10A and in next week's Tribune.

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