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## **Sarasota County celebrates 10 years of protecting environmental lands**

Sarasota County marks the 10-year anniversary of the Environmentally Sensitive Lands Protection Program (ESLPP) with an outdoor celebration at Deer Prairie Creek Preserve on the Myakka River in Venice. The free public event begins at 9 a.m., Saturday, Oct. 17, and features hay rides, wildlife displays with live native reptiles and booths on wildfire controls and native plants. Ecotourism outfitters will be on hand to suggest kayaking and equestrian opportunities, while naturalists lead walks searching for wildflowers, birds and other critters.

ESLPP is the result of citizen desires to protect both large and small areas for wildlife habitat and nature-based recreation. In March 1999, voters approved a referendum to authorize funding for land acquisition that would preserve and protect forest and scrub habitats, waterways and wetlands within Sarasota County.

According to Sarasota County land protection coordinator Brooke Elias, the program has successfully protected more than 27,000 acres over the past 10 years. Protected lands range from the eight-acre Pocono Trail Preserve in Nokomis, one of the few remaining natural waterfronts, to the 6,400-acre Deer Prairie Creek Preserve that protects an entire watershed.

“Our Environmentally Sensitive Lands Protection Program is recognized both within Florida and the nation,” said Elias. “Because of strong citizen support, we’ll be able to leave connected trailways, protected creeks, and wildlife encounters as a legacy for our kids.”

Deer Prairie Creek Preserve, which is located at 7001 Forbes Trail in Venice, has a diversity of habitats and wildlife, including pine flatwoods, scrub, prairies, wetlands and the river. These areas provide homes for gopher tortoises, alligators, otters, wild turkeys, swallow-tailed kites, scrub-jays and many wading birds. Native flowering plants, such as St. John’s wort, tarflower and pine lily thrive here. The entire length of the Deer Prairie Creek is now protected, ensuring that cleaner water flows into both the ‘Wild and Scenic’ Myakka River and the Gulf of Mexico. With over 60 miles of trails and seven miles of river front, Deer Prairie Creek Preserve invites hikers, horseback riders and paddlers to explore.

For more information on Sarasota County’s Environmentally Sensitive Lands Protection Program or the 10th Anniversary celebration, please call the Sarasota County Call Center at 941-861-5000 and ask for Natural Resources.

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