

Meeting celebrates lake's 18th year as protected wetlands

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PATRICK IRELAND WITH the Texas A&M Center for Invasive Species Eradication spoke about the weevil project aimed at controlling giant salvinia on Caddo Lake during the World Wetlands Day celebration Wednesday.

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KARNACK — World Wetlands Day was observed Wednesday night with presentations focused on Caddo Lake, which is celebrating its 18th year as a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance.

“There is celebrating all around the world for protecting wetlands with up to 30 sites and growing in the United States,” said Caddo Lake Institute President Rick Lowerre. “How do we get people thinking about the connection of wetlands and waterfowl? Caddo Lake was the 13th, and it’s valuable to spread the word about wetland protection.”

The event was hosted by the Caddo Lake Clearinghouse at the Karnack Community Center with about 35 in attendance from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Texas Parks and Wildlife, Caddo Lake Institute, guests from the U.S. Geological Survey as well as locals.

Tim Bister, fisheries biologist for Texas Parks & Wildlife, gave a presentation on the paddlefish species, one of the world’s oldest species that has not changed much over the 300 to 400 million years of its known existence. A paddlefish release was slated for Wednesday was cancelled due to adverse weather conditions.

“It became a Texas threatened species in 1977, and there was a paddlefish recovery project from the 1980s through 1992,” said Bister, who described a man-enhanced spawning area created for paddlefish on Big Cypress Bayou in 2008 and methods known to work in other Texas streams to bring the populations up.

“It is extinct in four states and listed as threatened. Capture and harvest is illegal,” Bister said. He added spawning conditions for the fish were hampered by man-made water controls, but that the Corps of Engineers at Lake O’ the Pines may be asked to mimic natural flows during certain times to make paddlefish spawning more likely. Tracking for the next release of paddlefish may also be done through radio transmitters to determine where the fish go after they enter the lake.

The annual celebration is also a rally to energize those who hope to make big strides throughout the rest of the year. Projects were described for lake education, refuge forestry and habitat development as well as recreational paddling trails.

“The number of paddlers I see are growing, and we will have more exploratory meetings,” said Diane Jones, a regular kayaker at Caddo Lake for the past 13 years. “Kayakers and canoers are the kind of people you want to come — quiet, nature loving people.”

Caddo canoe trails have already been mapped with information about water levels and indicating Corps of Engineers mile markers. Handouts for this and other information was made available. Predictions for the giant salvinia crop, water hyacinth crop and efforts to combat these were interwoven into several presentations with its focus brought home by Patrick Ireland, assigned to an experimental phase of giant salvinia weevil rearing.

“We have set up the infrastructure and started growing weevils. We are keeping them alive over the winter to put out in spring after the freeze danger is gone,” said Ireland, with Texas A&M University Center for Invasive Species Eradication.

Ireland will monitor their effects and is optimistic that after the first population of weevils is introduced another will be ready within 100 days. He has also undertaken an over-wintering project to determine how well the weevils will survive in water temperatures colder than that to which they are accustomed.

Bister returned more predictions that the crops of invasive tropical water plants this year may not be as heavily affected by cold and freezing temperatures as it was last year, which saw a drop in giant salvinia from an estimated 3,200 acres in 2009 to just 600 in 2010 due to cold.

Also, Refuge Manager Mark Williams gave detailed reports on the construction of “green tree reservoirs,” developed into logging road construction, which also benefit migrating duck populations. And Gary Endsley with the Today Foundation outlined the Healthy Habitats programs for school children at Karnack ISD.

Among upcoming studies for the region was a “comprehensive plant list” being compiled by Phil Turnipseed, P.E., director for the National Wetlands Research Center, who was also in attendance. Also, students from Panola College and East Texas Baptist University biology departments attended and expressed interest in upcoming projects requiring volunteers.

The Caddo Lake Clearinghouse includes stakeholder organizations including the city of Uncertain, the Greater Caddo Lake Association of Texas, the Caddo Lake Area Chamber of Commerce and Tourism, Friends of the National Wildlife Refuge and Caddo Lake Institute.