

April 22, 2019

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PHOTO CAPTION INFO:

One of CREW's leaders, Dana Crater, M.D., and members Luke Crater and Henry Whitman unveil the National Wildlife Federation plaque proclaiming that Sanibel Congregational UCC is a Certified Wildlife Habitat.

Groups that encouraged CREW members to apply for National Wildlife Federation certification were represented at the ceremony on Earth Day by (from left) Rob Shewfelt, chair of the Children & Youth Committee; Jean Chandler, chair of the Green Team; Dana Crater, a CREW leader; and Nancy Jones of the Children & Youth Committee.

Sanibel Congregational UCC's youth group checks off all the right boxes for wildlife-habitat designation

Wildlife conservation might not be the first thing that springs to mind when thinking about churches, even on the sanctuary island of Sanibel. Nonetheless, as the Rev. Dr. John H. Danner reminded those assembled on Earth Day to celebrate Sanibel Congregational United Church of Christ's certification as a "Garden for Wildlife," the church covenant reads in part, "We will...do all we can to protect as well the birds, animals and plants on this fragile barrier island."

That protection advised by the covenant is in good hands. Thanks to the combined efforts of three groups, the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) has now designated SCUCC's property at 2050 Periwinkle Way a National Wildlife Habitat. Nancy Jones of the Children & Youth Committee brought the idea to the committee, which is chaired by Rob Shewfelt. They involved the Green Team, chaired by Jean Chandler. She, in turn, contacted the leaders of the church's CREW youth group of middle school and high school students to suggest they pursue certification as a "green" activity. CREW's leaders, Dana Crater, M.D., Jim McCallion, and Brit Stroud, felt it was a good opportunity.

"Our church grounds are extremely lush and diverse, so we thought we might have a good chance to get certified," said Crater. "It was a great experience for them, and it's important to our church to protect the environment."

Thus, one evening several months ago, with NWF's extensive "Walk Through Checklist" in hand, CREW members and leaders went on a scavenger hunt. They explored the church's property, which not only includes the main campus across from the Periwinkle Place shopping area, but also extends onto 17 undeveloped acres behind the church.

They checked off items from among the dozens in four major categories: food, water, cover, and places to raise young. To become certified, the property had to qualify in a specified number of areas for each category. For example, in the food category, some of the checked boxes are nectar, pollen, and foliage/twigs. Among the places to raise young are mature trees, wetland, and burrow.

The checklist also includes a section for sustainable practices, with numerous subcategories. CREW members assessed the church grounds based on the major areas: soil and water conservation, controlling exotic species, and organic practices. They ascertained that SCUCC complies with the required items.

Once CREW determined that the SCUCC grounds meet the requirements, the NWF provided the plaque that was unveiled on Monday, April 22. Announcing that the church property is now *officially* a wildlife habitat, Danner, the church's Senior Pastor, told those on hand for the ceremony that he recognizes that this habitat "is something God and Nature have had going on for centuries." He added, "It's always important to have the next generation involved."

The Rev. Deb Kunkel, Associate Pastor at SCUCC, expressed appreciation to everyone who helped with the certification process and thanked all who attended the ceremony, including Public Outreach Coordinator Alexis Horn of the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation.

Before the unveiling of the plaque, which is visible from the main stairway to the sanctuary, those present sang "All Things Bright and Beautiful," and Pastor Danner offered a prayer. He also read "Egrets," a poem about nature and wildlife by the late Mary Oliver, whom he referred to as "the unofficial poet laureate of Sanibel."

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