



Published - April, 22, 2007

## Environmentalists unite for Earth Day

Jessica Coleman  
jcoleman@pnj.com

A lovable tree took over Bayview Park Saturday.

Twiggy, a tree that gave away free hugs, was part of the 37th annual Earth Day Pensacola.

The idea: Reverse the common stereotype of environmentalists as "tree huggers."

The event's apt theme on a picture-perfect day was "Preserve Our Paradise."

"We live in paradise," said Brenda Bischoff, director of Earth Day Pensacola. "What we try to do is inspire and educate our community to make choices that will improve our quality of life."

She estimated that substantially more people turned out than the 8,000 to 10,000 who attended last year.

With about 60 exhibitors and 24 vendors at the park, visitors met environmental inspiration wherever they turned.

Friends of Perdido Bay, the Bay Area Safe Air Coalition, Sustainable West Florida and the Escambia County Democratic Party were among exhibitors.

For children visiting Earth Day, there were several activities.

The Earth Day Challenge was a hands-on environmental scavenger hunt in which kids worked to complete five educational activities at several booths around the park.

"It's critical to teach kids environmental responsibility because they're the next generation," Bischoff said. "We have a responsibility to create that earth consciousness, but you have to make it fun."



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Tree huggers Don Julian, left, and Kelsie Stortz-Hall, right, give a little love to a tree, volunteer Lillie-Kate Minor Saturday afternoon at the Bayview Community Center Earth Day celebration.  
Jennifer Cecil/jcecil@pnj.com

Keith Wilkins, director of the Escambia County Neighborhood and Environmental Services Department, said he hoped people would get a better understanding from the department's booth of what the county is doing for the environment.

"We want to get out the message that Escambia County has some good environmental programs," he said.

Many environmentalists at the event hoped visitors would be inspired to get involved.

"It's easy to do," said Enid Sisskin, director of Gulf Coast Environmental Defense. "There are local solutions to a lot of these problems."