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## Girl scouts' golden wish: save the May River

By Sara Wright



Sometimes it isn't the size of an audience that matters, but whether the message takes hold.

When Bluffton High School senior Jessica Wilkes-Berry envisioned the screening of Greg Smith's award-winning documentary "Keeping the May River Wild" at her school, she imagined a full house.

Instead, about three classes of students learned about how humans threaten the wildlife — including about 500 dolphins — that call the May River home.

But about 45 students are now empowered with the knowledge to make a difference.

"I thought it was very interesting to know how many animals are being hurt because of us," said junior Eriona Brooks.

"We let the grass grow naturally, just water it," she said proudly.

Wilkes-Berry chose to raise awareness about protecting the May as her Gold Award project for Girl Scouts, the highest award possible for scouts ages 14-18. (It's similar to an Eagle Scout project in Boy Scouts.) She's also developing a badge that younger scouts can earn by taking steps to protect the May.

"They have to test the water, learn about the May River," she said.

Wiles-Berry arranged for Smith to come to BHS last week for a screening of his still photo movie visual essay, recent winner of the Southern Lens award at the Beaufort International Film Festival. The 25-minute piece

### **Weed and Feed Ecological Information**

"Drift or runoff may adversely affect non target plants. Do not apply directly to water, or to areas where surface water is present, or to intertidal areas below the mean high water mark. Do not contaminate water when disposing of equipment wash water. When cleaning equipment do not pour the wash water on the ground. Spray or drain over a large area away from wells and other water sources."

Copies of "Keeping the May River Wild" are available at [www.imediasmith.com](http://www.imediasmith.com)

juxtaposes Smith's photographic images of native flora and fauna against the human pressures of development.

After the screening, teacher Erin Reichert asked Smith what people can do for the May.

Top of the list: Don't buy, let alone use, Weed and Feed.

The warning label on Weed and Feed used to read "Do not apply within 200 feet of wetlands," Smith said said.

"There is no place in Beaufort County that's not within 200 feet of wetlands. This is a product inappropriate to be sold here, yet tons and tons of it was sold this weekend. We spend hundreds of millions engineering a problem."

Also, allow the clumps of pine needles and foliage under bushes to remain: Song birds nest in the groundcover.

Also, keep water from steam cleaning carpets out of the May by not dumping it outside. Researchers believe that fire retardant chemicals contained in carpets are why those 500 native dolphins are sick.

Planting native bushes that drink water helps prevent runoff from lawns. So do rain barrels and rain gardens.

Development itself has stanching the natural ebb and flow of all water in the Bluffton area, Smith said.

"This is our version of landscaping, to destroy native plants and habitats."

During droughts, development retention ponds hold onto water, so crabbers are having to chase the crabs farther up creeks. The water held in the ponds gets nasty before big rains finally wash it into the May.

Wildlife, formerly free to roam, are concentrated, which concentrates their waste products, further impacting the May.

According to the Clemson Extension, people should fertilize their lawns only once a year. Fertilizer runoff leads to algae blooms.

"We have a problem. The river's in trouble," said Smith.

"I want my grandchildren to be able to walk out in the river, crack open an oyster and eat it without fearing for their lives."

Bluffton High and the schools complex are all built on a site of wetlands, and run off from the school will likely find its way into the May.

Wilkes-Berry hopes the knowledge gained by a few of her peers will also seep in, creating a ground swell of support for the health of May River ecosystem.