

Mound House Earth Day Events MRTF's "Ask Me" Environmental Booth

By Gary Mooney

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With Earth Day 2021 on the horizon, get your environmental swerve on at the iconic Mound House on Fort Myers Beach! The Mound House offers two new and free Earth Day events on Thursday, April 22. While free, advance registration is necessary due to space limitations at www.moundhouse.org.

The "Earth Day Beach Walk & Clean Up" is for all ages at 9 a.m. Meet at the Bay Oaks Recreational Center at 2731 Oak Street, just down from the Fort Myers Beach Public Library. Mound House Staff leads a free "Beach Walk Clean Up" while providing educational lessons about wildlife and plants. The walk begins at Beach Access #25, with free parking at Bay Oaks. The Mound House provides gloves and buckets, with all participants wearing masks.

Earth Day afternoon features the free "Earth Day Clean Up: BYOK!" for ages 12 and up at 1 p.m. "BYOK" standing for "Bring Your Own Kayak!" Departing from the Mound House launch, kayakers cut monofilament lines from mangroves and clean up litter while exploring Matanzas Pass and Hell Peckney Bay. The Mound House has limited kayaks, so it encourages participants to bring their own. It provides gloves, buckets, and scissors, with everyone wearing masks on land and life jackets on water.

The Town of Fort Myers Beach operates the Mound House as a museum complex and cultural and environmental learning center that offers numerous monthly educational programs, including for children. All visitors wear masks, while observing Center for Disease Control and Social Distancing precautions. It is open Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. The Mound House is at 451 Connecticut Street with overflow parking at 216 Connecticut. Admission is \$10 ages 13 & up, \$8 for students with IDs, \$5 ages 6 to 12, and 5 & under free, with Town residents receiving a 50% discount. For information, reservations, and a monthly programs schedule, call 239-765-0865 or see www.moundhouse.org. To celebrate Earth Day, the Mound House Museum Store offers 20% off all earth-friendly merchandise that day.

A Hands-On Difference

"This is the first time the Mound House is hosting Earth Day events in this capacity," stated Environmental Education Manager Dexter Norris. "We want to do something outdoors, in a safe and healthy manner, where people make a difference in a hands-on manner to directly and positively impact our local environment. The two Earth Day events are free, and that is especially unusual for a kayak program, but folks pay us back with their Earth Day clean-up efforts to beautify the beach. It is important to register in advance, to keep groups small to observe COVID-19 precautions, and especially for the afternoon program to know who will bring their own kayaks."

Dexter stressed that the environmentally-sensitive Mound House "treats every day like Earth Day! Much of what we do carries an environmental focus, like our native plantings

that do not require much water or any fertilizer. It is important that we pass this philosophy on to our guests so they make these behaviors part of their daily lives, to do the right things environmentally. If we all do the small things every day, that adds up to big changes, and one of our goals is to articulate that message. By offering our two Earth Day programs, we give residents and visitors the chance to get outside, clean up our island community, and share our environmental education and passion with others.”

“Get Your Inquiring Minds Stoked!”

Assisting the Mound House’s environmental movement is a Town of Fort Myers Beach volunteer committee known as the Marine Resources Task Force (MRTF), with its seven members appointed by the FMB Town Council, including Jennifer Rusk. “The MRTF promotes the stewardship of our marine resources,” she explained, “to halt further damage to and the rehabilitation of the Estero Bay and its waters, including air and water quality as well as wildlife and plant life. We live on an island, so it is our responsibility to keep it beautiful and environmentally healthy, so we meet the second Wednesday of each month in a public forum in Town Hall to address these issues.”

An initiative MRTF recently inaugurated is the “‘Ask Me’ Pop-Up Environmental Adventure Booth.” “MTRF was looking for new and innovative ways to get our message and mission out to the community,” Jennifer recalled, “when a friend said, ‘Why don’t you do a “Pop-Up Tent,” like they do for restaurants and food trucks,’ and I thought that was a good idea. I brought the concept to MRTF, the other members felt that it was great, and off we went!”

The “‘Ask Me’ Pop-up Environmental Adventure Booth debuted on March 31, and was instantly popular, Jennifer said. “Several organizations joined us that day, like Turtle Time, the Florida Master Gardener Program, and the SWF Audubon Chapter, and everyone spoke with us and asked questions on various environmental subjects. A few days later, we had the ‘Ask Me’ Booth at Lovers Key State Park’s ‘Mermaid Festival’ and enjoyed the same reaction, letting us know we were on to something good.”

Jennifer is cognizant that MRTF cannot have representatives from every environmental group at each “Pop-Up” site, “so we came up with the ‘Ask Me’ Question Box! If the organization you need to speak with is not present that day, write your question and put it in the box. I will sort through them and forward them to the specific group who can help you find your answer. Questions so far are all across the board, and as current as today’s headlines. With the Piney Point crisis in the Tampa Bay area, water quality questions are the most common. No matter your issue or concern, visit the ‘Ask Me’ Pop-Up Environmental Adventure Booth and get your inquiring minds stoked!”

To get your inquiring mind stoked on Earth Day, the “Ask Me” Booth is at the two free Mound House programs. “We will be at Newton Beach Park at 4650 Estero Boulevard,” added Jennifer, “where the ‘Beach Walk & Clean-Up’ concludes, from 9 to 11 a.m. We then move to the Mound House from Noon to 2 p.m. In addition to our experts and information, we will have Turtle Time knickknacks for kids.”

Upcoming Fort Myers Beach “Ask Me” Booth appearances will include Bowditch Point Park, Bay Oaks Recreational Center, and Times Square, as well as return trips to the Mound House and Newton Beach Park. “Look for us all over the island,” Jennifer stated, “at all kinds of events, like at Lynn Hall Memorial Park on Saturday, April 24, from 9 a.m. to Noon and the ‘Taste of The Beach’ event with the FMB Chamber of Commerce at Salty Sam’s Marina on Sunday, May 2. To find future ‘Ask Me’ Booth locations, see the Town webpage at www.fortmyersbeachfl.gov.”

Jennifer stressed that “we are still feeling our way and want to add future appearances as well as new environmental experts. If you want the ‘Ask Me’ Booth at your event or can partner with us to share your wisdom, contact me at Jruskfmb@gmail.com or 757-450-5451. The more appearances and partners, the more inquiring minds we stoke!”