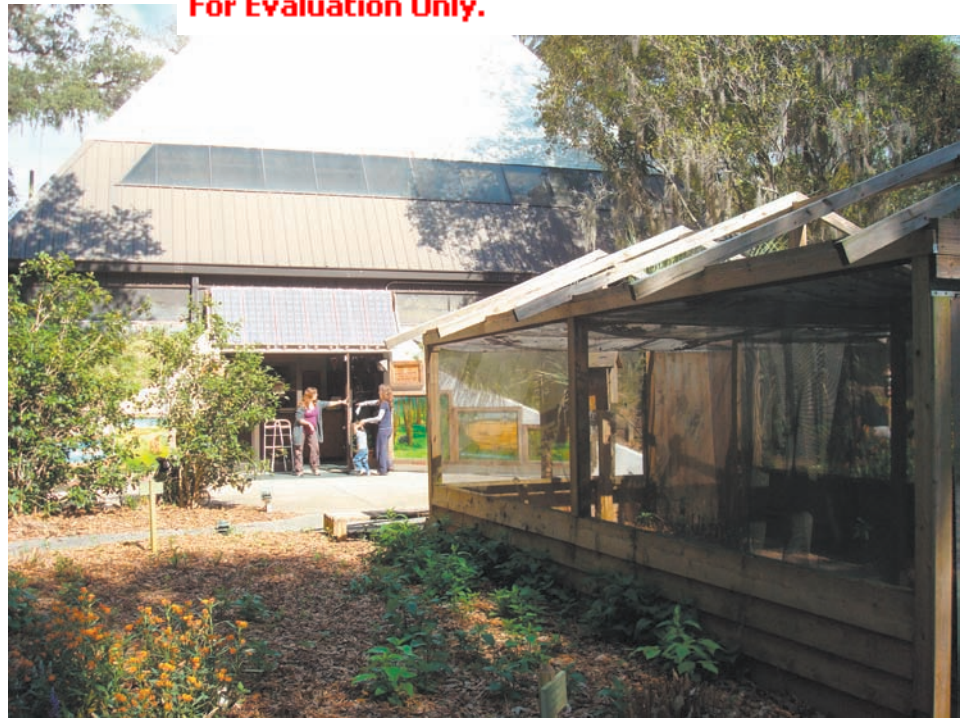




Executive Director Mark Mummaw inside Tree Hill Nature Center



Tree Hill's butterfly house and the Nature Center

New faces, fresh ideas

Tree Hill gears up for 10th Annual Butterfly Festival **BY ANNA RABHAN**

It seems like there are new parks, nature preserves and curated natural areas opening up every year in and around Jacksonville. Tree Hill Nature Center, founded in 1971, is almost literally the granddaddy of them all. But as Tree Hill enters its fourth decade it is, like the plants and animals that make their homes there, adapting to its environment. And this year, the renewed energy of new faces drives the presentation of the 10th Annual Joseph A. Strasser Butterfly Festival.

In 2009, Tree Hill's long-time Executive Director retired and, while the Board of Directors searched for someone to fill the position, Mark Mummaw filled in. Mummaw had been at Tree Hill for over 15 years in just about every position there. He had a vision for Tree Hill's future, and the only way to realize that vision was to lead. "I had been working for five years on this business model to separate leadership." Basically, he proposed to the board that leadership responsibilities be divided into three parts so that "the Executive Director wasn't taxed to the point where it would become inefficient."

Since June 2010, when the Board recognized him as Tree Hill's new Executive Director, he's been streamlining operations and programs to cope with the economic downturn. Having moved into leadership at a very difficult time for leaders of nonprofits, his vision for Tree Hill's future also includes moving away from public support because he sees that being drastically cut in the near future. "I'm trying to work on building a reserve for Tree Hill by offering fee-based programs, memberships... individual-based reliance," he says.

At the same time, Tree Hill is trying to offer more to its visitors. The 50-acre preserve, furnished with boardwalks, informational signs and benches, includes three ecosystems visitors can explore with a helpful trail map that explains points of interest along the way. At the front of the park, the glass and steel pyramid-shaped Nature Center houses a natural history museum with exhibits on topics ranging from Florida to the Amazon. At the top of the pyramid, there is a reptile room with live exemplars of Florida snakes and an impressive collection of giant tortoise shells. Out in front of the Nature Center, visitors can meet chickens and roosters, a barred owl, goats and, of course, the butterflies. One could argue that the programs are really the heart of Tree Hill. School programs to educate kids about nature, animal encounters, Boy Scout badge programs, workshops, Family Saturdays, and programs for school and summer camp groups are just a few of the things they do. "Education, conservation and awareness are the three major parts of our mission," Mummaw says.

One challenge Tree Hill faces is that the Nature Center can only handle about 80 kids at a time, and even that capacity is rough on the grounds. Getting to the amphitheater side of the property, however, is problematic without direct access between the two sides. School groups have to get back on the bus to go from one side of the property to the other, which isn't always possible if the buses leave. Mummaw is spearheading the effort to build a 500-foot boardwalk between the two sides of the property. "This will allow us to increase our capacity because we can utilize the amphitheater," he says. "When we have larger groups, which we can facilitate at the amphitheater – we can do over

200 – we can do a program for half of the group at the amphitheater while the other half is visiting [the Nature Center] and switch." They have \$15,000 of the \$130,000 the project will cost. Mummaw likens it to a catch-22. "Tree Hill doesn't have the funds, but the boardwalk will increase our ability to support ourselves." They are working on creative fundraising ideas like having people sponsor a section of the boardwalk with a marker to honor their sponsorship.

Tree Hill's biggest and most recognizable fundraiser is coming up on April 30 from 10 am to 4 pm. The 10th Annual Joseph A. Strasser Butterfly Festival has become Tree Hill's signature event, and it is also part of the "do more with less" transformation going on. They will be using the Animal Encounter, one of their showcase, fee-based programs that employs live animals from their collection to educate about habitats and adaptations, at the festival for two purposes. Mummaw says, "It will give our visitors an entertaining experience, an up-close experience, which will get them interested and show them the importance of those animals, but also it will advertise our program for future scheduling." They are going to do two Animal Encounters during the day inside the amphitheater, which they've never done before. Also new this year at the Butterfly Festival will be a climbing wall. While last year's festival concluded with a drum circle, it will be bigger this year.

There will be goats to pet, kids' games, live entertainment, guest lecturers, trail tours, gardening demonstrations, local vendors, and food and drinks as in past years. This year, though, they've tried to concentrate on attracting more environmentally associated vendors – those that have an environmental message, sell organic products or educate about animals or plants. A few examples of vendors and exhibitors who will be there this year are Maggie's Herbs, St. Johns Riverkeeper and the Environmental Protection Board. Suncoast Seabird Sanctuary, which rescues 15,000 birds a year, will also likely do a program in the amphitheater again this year. Mummaw is also working on participation by Horse Sense & Sensitivity, an organization that uses horses as a type of therapy. He hopes they'll bring some of their horses out because, he says, "It's just amazing the effect the horses have on people."

And then, of course, the traditional release of native butterflies will take place at 3:30 pm. Mummaw is excited that they will have even more butterflies to release this year. When asked what he thinks brings people out to the Butterfly Festival, he says, "I think the biggest part of the Butterfly Festival that attracts people is the mystery around the butterfly. ... It goes from a caterpillar to a butterfly in, say, a week! Having a butterfly land on you is a pretty cool experience. Nature is intriguing, and Tree Hill is a showcase for that."

The April 30th Butterfly Festival, at 7152 Lone Star Road, is \$5 for adults; \$4 for seniors, military and students; \$3 for children ages 4-17; children under 4 get in free. Wear comfortable shoes and sunscreen, and keep an eye on the website (www.treehill.org) for more information.

Please email your questions, comments or suggestions to anna@eujacksonville.com.

