

Caching in: E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center to host geocaching event

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Right now, at this very moment there is a treasure hunt going on around the world. And no, it has nothing to do with gold coins and pirates.

For the muggles out there, the treasure hunt in question is called geocaching. Maybe you've seen someone discover a geocache, which is specifically a container hidden at a specific location. Maybe there's one hidden at the very spot you're reading this.



Geocaching — the prefix geo referring to Earth and the global reach of the activity and cache, an old, French word meaning hiding place — was originated more than a decade ago by Dave Ulmer, a computer consultant. Ulmer wanted to test the accuracy of GPS technology by hiding a navigational target in the woods and posting its coordinates on the internet. The only rules for the finder were simple: "Take some stuff, leave some stuff."

Today, geocaching is conducted the same way.

The beauty of geocaching however, is not the proposed "stuff" you may find, but the experience of navigating the world and discovering new and interesting things about the environment. So it's no surprise that E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center is joining in on the fun.

"I think it is only natural that the Biophilia Center joins in on the fun and introduces others to this outdoor adventure," said Lauren Bray, environmental educator at Biophilia. "Geocaching is a great way for families to discover this natural world and hopefully gain an appreciation for the outdoors, which is exactly what we are trying to accomplish. We want to show this new generation that exploring new places, getting exercise, and maybe even getting a little dirty can be more fun than the virtual alternative."

Co-hosting the Aug. 31 event is Destination Archaeology, a museum in Pensacola that highlights all of the archaeological sites in the state of Florida.

"There will definitely be an educational aspect to this program, in the sense that people will learn not just about geocaching, but how through this activity they can learn about Florida's environment, history and archaeology," said Mike Thomin, manager at Destination Archaeology.

You will get two chances to learn about and experience geocaching firsthand with a program in the morning and afternoon. Participants will learn what geocaching is, how they can participate as well as learn about the series of geocaches hidden

throughout Northwest Florida by the Florida Public Archaeology Network (FPAN).

There's even a geocache hidden at Biophilia, which you'll have the opportunity to find.

"Many geocaches are placed along nature trails and try to point out something interesting about the surrounding area," Thomin said.

Through the series of geocaches hidden by FPAN, which are scattered from Pensacola to Port St. Joe, individuals can learn about the history of Northwest Florida and the importance of preserving cultural resources, Thomin explained.

Don't worry if you're a non-geocacher, or muggle, as they say, the event is geared toward all levels of geocaching.

"Not only is the program designed for all ages, but it is also designed for people who have never heard of geocaching before as well as avid players," Thomin said.

Not all explorations lead to tangible treasure. Some coordinates may lead to a location where people can learn about a unique geoscience feature of the Earth. These are called Earthcaches.

"For example, at Falling Waters State Park, there is an EarthCache that leads the player to a waterfall," Thomin said. "Although it's not a physical container like a normal geocache, visitors to EarthCaches usually learn about the natural environment and how they are best managed and protected."

So whether you were FTF, first to find, or DNF, did not find, geocaching is more about exploring than hidden treasure.

"I have found that most geocaches are hidden at places that someone thought was special and should be shared with others," Thomin said. "It's a great outdoor activity because it takes people to places they might not have otherwise gone to or even knew existed."

WANT TO GO?

Geocaching at Biophilia Center will be 11 a.m. to 12 p.m. and 1 p.m. to 2 p.m. Aug. 31. For more information, visit eowilsoncenter.org. You can also visit www.geocaching.com.

THE LINGO

The world of geocaching has a language of its own. Before you head out in the wilderness, here are a few key words to remember:

Muggle: A non-geocacher. Based on "Muggle" from the Harry Potter series, which is a non-magical person.

Hitchhiker: A hitchhiker is an item that is placed in a cache, and has instructions to travel to other caches

Mystery or Puzzle Caches: The "catch-all" of cache types, this form of geocache may involve complicated puzzles that you will first need to solve to determine the coordinates.

SWAG: An acronym often referred to as standing for 'Stuff We All Get.' It includes the trade items left in caches by geocachers.

Ground Zero (GZ): The point where your GPS device shows that you have reached the cache location. At Ground Zero, you are zero feet (or zero meters) away from your destination.

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