Stockton certifies nature guides
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The Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge and Richard Stockton College of New Jersey are partnering to offer new environmental education programs for naturalists and interpretive guides this spring. Each course of study will lead to certification, one for volunteer master naturalists and the other for certified interpretive guides.

Sandy Perchetti, volunteer coordinator at Forsythe, said, "We had been reading about this master naturalist program and wanted it here."

Currently offered in 20 states, the master naturalist program is similar to Rutgers University's successful master gardeners program. The refuge contacted Stockton and found it was very interested, she said. Cynthia Sosnowski, executive director of Continuing Studies for Health Sciences and Human Services, and Barry Keefe helped set up the programs.

Master naturalist classes, mostly at the refuge headquarters in Galloway Township, and field trips will take place from April 9 to May 7, Perchetti said.

The 40 hours of workshops and field experiences will be led by Stockton faculty - including Jack Connor, Rudy Arndt, Carol Slocum and Patrick Hossay - as well as representatives from the refuge and regional environmental groups, she said.

Master naturalists will be taught about general ecology of coastal systems, the forests and pinelands; coastal birds; environmental management, including policy and ethics; marine and estuary habitats; coastal mammals, amphibians and reptiles; and native and invasive coastal plants.

The program will include a kayak field trip at Sedge Island Natural Resource Center on Barnegat Bay.

Once the course is completed, graduates will need to complete eight hours of advanced training and 40 hours of volunteer work at Forsythe or other environmental organizations to receive certification as a volunteer master naturalist, Perchetti said.

Training to become a certified interpretive guide will run 32 hours from May 14 to 21, including a three-day intensive weekend immersion session.

The training and certification are overseen by the National Association for Interpretation, a not-for-profit group that says it originated 50 years ago for "those involved in the interpretation of natural and cultural heritage resources in settings such as parks, zoos, museums, nature centers, aquaria, botanical gardens and historical sites."

Costs of the programs, including all materials, are $229 for the Volunteer Master Naturalist Certificate program, $169 for the Certified Interpretive Guide program, or $319 for both.

Half of the 20 openings for the programs are reserved for current refuge volunteers, Perchetti said, and the other half are available for registration through Stockton's
continuing education Web site, www.stockton.edu/hshs (click on certificate programs), or by calling 609-652-4227.
Don't despair if the programs are sold out. Perchetti said they will be offered again and hopefully will be continued for a long time.
Certification can help obtaining certain kinds of guide and interpretation work and broaden the skills of teachers and others, she said, but it can also become a path for people who want to help a nature organization.
"All of the environmental organizations, including Forsythe, are hurting for money," Perchetti said. "Hopefully, this will open opportunities for people who want to volunteer here and elsewhere."