Water-testing project begins at Alligator Bayou

By MICHAEL JOE

A group of LSU students and Sierra Club members paddled along Alligator Bayou on Sunday armed with a simple weapon in their quest to keep the area environmentally sound — empty test tubes.

Around them, an egret swooped onto an old cypress knee and a pea-sized frog leaped across the duckweed.

Storm clouds floating above them in the morning held off until afternoon, after they had finished their task on the bayou, which is about two miles south of the intersection of Interstate 10 and Highland Road.

At five locations, they took water samples, testing for indications of pollution: unusually high or low readings of nitrate or sulfur; phosphate or fecal coliform. The bacteria measured to assess sewage pollution.

On Sunday morning marked the beginning of a longer research project by the Sierra Club. They hope to take samples every few weeks to establish a database of information about water quality in Alligator Bayou.

"We'll see the seasonal changes, and when something happens we'll see the difference," said 44-year-old Beverly Bauer, a member of the local chapter of the environmental group Sierra Club. "Say a chemical spill happens, we'll see that something has gone wrong."

The state Department of Environmental Quality already does water quality testing, but not as often — funding and different goals limit the state's efforts to assess water quality comprehensively for every bayou, river or lake, she said.

Her friend, Sierra Club member Maura Wood, added: "We have the quantitative and the state has the qualitative analysis.

Since explorers first navigated the waterways of southeast Louisiana in search of a shortcut to the Mississippi River, humans have put a heavy burden on nature, say conservationists and educators who study wetlands.

When French explorer Pierre LeMoyne, Sieur d'Iberville, "came down the river, he encountered cypress trees 2,000 or 3,000 years old, and as majestic as their cousins, the redwoods," said Richard Condrey, 52, an LSU oceanography professor.

"And in those areas where there wasn't cypress, there was cane," he said. "And where there wasn't cane, there were 200- or 300-year-old oaks."

Since then, the natural movement of water from the Mississippi into the bayou has been regulated and water and wildlife are suffering, Condrey said.

Despite all the research done and levees built to control the habitat, studies often show "man has a lot of trouble imitating nature," said Eugene Turner, the
director of the Coastal Ecology Institute at LSU.

Human waste has also been a problem in the Alligator Bayou area.

In 1996, two local prisons — the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women and Elayn Hunt Correctional Center — were found to be dumping poorly treated sewage into Spanish Lake, near Alligator Bayou.

But Turner said the biggest threat to Alligator Bayou is something else — “development.”

“Drive in here and see,” he said of the new tract homes along Alligator Bayou Road. “The size of the swamp is no longer the swamp and a buffer area. It’s just the swamp.”

State legislators have formed a broad-based committee to look at ways to preserve the area, which includes about 20,000 acres of swamp and bottom land hardwoods.

The committee has plans to gather information from state and federal regulators, landowners and area residents to help preserve the area while allowing some activities, including hunting and fishing.