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Spanning more than 16,000 acres, Sapelo Island is the fourth-largest barrier island in Georgia. Nestled along the island's western perimeter is a place where students and visitors can learn about the things that make Sapelo such an intriguing place -- the Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve.

The reserve offers opportunities to explore the island's incredible cultural history and its ecological significance.

Administered by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and managed by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Sapelo's education center receives more than 6,000 visitors a year. There are nature trails, guided tours and an educational facility complete with a 40-seat classroom and a lab equipped with microscopes and work stations.

"What is really exciting for me is when I see the teachers have what I call a 'light bulb moment,'" said Brooke Vallaster, education coordinator for the reserve. "You see kids have it, that moment when they really get it, and that's great. But when a teacher has it, you know they are going to take that back with them and who knows how many kids they will inspire. That's my motivation."

The education center is open year-round, but most programs require pre-registration.

Educational programs are geared for grades 5-12 and can be customized based on the teacher's curriculum and preferences for the students. Teacher training workshops are also available.

Some of the more popular activities include the taking nature walks, learning to cast nets and exploring the Gullah communities on the island.

There are summer programs open to the public but they fill up fast. Vallaster recommends calling first.

"We generally advertise through the local papers, but word of mouth is so good that often programs fill up before we have even placed the ad," Vallaster said.

Sapelo's Visitor Center is open 7:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 8 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Saturday and 1:30-5 p.m. Sunday. Contact: (912) 437-3224 or sapelovc@darientel.net. On the

Web: www.sapelonerr.org.