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Governor declares March Florida Seagrass Awareness Month

In recognition of the importance of seagrass habitats to Florida's environment and economy, Florida Gov. Charlie Crist has proclaimed March to be Florida Seagrass Awareness Month. This is the ninth year of the statewide initiative, which Gov. Crist has called essential to preserving the state's marine environment, economy and quality of life.

The initiative also showcases Sarasota County's five-year-old volunteer program to survey seagrass in every bay in Sarasota to better understand local seagrass habitats.

According Amanda Dominguez of Sarasota County's Water Resources, nearly all of the commercially and recreationally important estuarine and marine animals depend on seagrass beds as refuge or habitat for some part of their life, making them directly responsible for bringing in millions of dollars annually from out-of-state and resident recreational and commercial fishermen.

"The information that has been generated from the county's survey has culminated in a baseline map of seagrass that will allow the county to identify areas of change refine restoration efforts," said Dominguez. "The information gathered through this program allows us to identify seagrass trends and manage these systems appropriately."

That's critical, says Dominguez, because seagrass beds serve as nurseries for juvenile fish, scallops, crabs and shrimp. Manatees, turtles, sharks and rays feed on the plants themselves or on the smaller creatures that live there. Many birds also feed in the grass flats

"Seagrass also helps maintain water quality by filtering and anchoring sediments," said Dominguez. "Without it, most of the regions they inhabit would be a seascape of unstable shifting sand and mud."

Dominguez notes that seagrass is often a victim of its own success, drawing boaters into richly populated underwater beds. "Many boat operators do not realize that when a propeller cuts across a seagrass meadow, it not only destroys the blades, it often tears up the rhizome system -- the network of runners that anchors seagrass to the bottom and transports nutrients the plant needs," said Dominguez. "Repeated injuries can interfere with the ecological functions normally carried out by seagrass."

Extensive scarring breaks the intact grass bed into smaller, disconnected "islands" of barren sandy patches that are unsuitable for many seagrass inhabitants. "Each new scar or similar injury makes the entire grass bed more susceptible to further erosion from natural forces such as storms, tides, and currents. If enough damage occurs to a single meadow, this valuable resource may be slowly eroded and along with it the important ecological functions it serves. The damage can take years to heal."

Dominguez says protecting this valuable resource is as simple as becoming a seagrass survey volunteer, and taking steps to prevent prop dredge scars when boating.

For more information, contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 861-5000.

Media note: A list of boating tips is attached, along with information about becoming a seagrass survey volunteer.

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