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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, Gov. Charlie Crist has designated March as "Florida Seagrass Awareness Month." In a release from the governor's office issued Feb. 24, 2009 Crist said, "Seagrass is essential to the ecology of Florida's waters, especially Tampa Bay. Preserving and protecting the state's seagrass is critical – not only to our marine environment, but also to our economy and quality of life."

According Amanda Dominguez of Sarasota County 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 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," said Dominguez. "Seagrass also helps maintain water quality by filtering and anchoring sediments. 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 grassbed into smaller, disconnected "islands" of barren sandy patches that are unsuitable for many seagrass inhabitants. "Each new scar or similar injury makes the entire grassbed 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."

For the last few years, Sarasota County and a small army of volunteers have been surveying sea grass species composition and algae coverage in every bay in Sarasota to better understand local habitats and identify trends that can help manage these systems. Their work has been so successful that the Florida Department of Environmental Protection invited the program coordinators to help expand the program to other regions.

To learn more about Sarasota County's seagrass mapping program, or for information about how to volunteer, contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 941-861-5000, visit our Web site at www.scgov.net or come to Sarasota County's Water Resource Volunteer booth at Oscar Scherer State Park's Earth Day Celebration on April 19, 2009.

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