

April 14, 2009

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Sarasota County celebrates Earth Day, oysters and seagrass volunteers

Sarasota County is helping celebrate Earth Day this year on Sunday, April 19, by honoring its seagrass mapping volunteers and issuing a call to volunteers interested in helping map oyster habitat. Staff will be on hand from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. at Oscar Scherer State Park to encourage volunteers who own shallow-draft boats such as flats boats, jon boats, kayaks and canoes to help locate and document oyster habitat in county bays and estuaries. Seagrass volunteers will be honored with a presentation and remarks from Sarasota County Commissioner Carolyn Mason at 11:30 a.m. Admission to the park is free all day.

According to Environmental Specialist Kathy Meaux, oyster habitats are vital structural components of estuarine and bay ecosystems. "Not only are they important commercial and recreational resources, they provide essential habitat and cover for numerous aquatic organisms," says Meaux. "The larva, spat (tiny, baby oysters) and adult oysters are an important food source for fish, birds and other aquatic organisms."

Meaux says they play a crucial role in water quality improvement through their capacity to filter 30 to 60 gallons of water per oyster, per day. They also function as key bio-indicators of the relative health of the aquatic ecosystem. "Because of these valuable attributes, it is important to have a current data set of oyster habitat locations throughout the county," said Meaux. "These will serve as a baseline to compare with future trends as watersheds are altered through development or restoration processes. They may also aid in the identification of potential restoration sites."

While knowledge about oyster biology and ecology is fairly extensive, there are no complete maps depicting the extent and abundance of oyster habitat in all county bays. County staff successfully mapped oyster habitat in 17 coastal creeks in late 2008 to early 2009 and are ready to work with volunteers to complete the work in bays and estuaries.

For more information about the oyster mapping project, contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 941-861-5000 and ask for Water Resources.

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