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Scallop seeding program by volunteers begins second year

After last year's successful pilot program, the Sarasota Environmental Aquatics (SEA) Team is again partnering with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute and local volunteers to increase the local bay scallop population. Through a scallop seeding project, environmental officials hope to propagate scallop species, which in the past had declined due to over-fishing and poor water quality.

This year's program officially begins in August, although some returning volunteers may get started before the end of July.

This month, the Environmental Protection Agency's Gulf of Mexico Program honored the SEA Team with a Gulf Guardian Award for finding innovative solutions to improve the environmental health of the Gulf, in concert with economic development.

In last year's pilot project, seeding cages were placed at 18 sites throughout the county. The sites were under the docks of volunteer waterfront property owners who lived directly on the bay. Each cage contained 25 scallops. Volunteers maintained the cages, measured growth rates and provided mortality counts each month.

"We really want to thank our volunteers for their efforts," said Sarasota County Environmental Specialist Rene Janneman. "Many of them are returning as volunteers this year. Their participation is having a direct impact on the scallop population and helping us gain some insights into the scallop life cycles and growth rates within county waters. This knowledge is important in guiding us in our current scallop seeding project and future restoration efforts."

Janneman said that the scallops act as water quality sentinels because they are so sensitive to environmental changes. The seeding cages help to bolster the existing population, and may raise the population to a sustainable level.

"We want to ensure the continued survival of scallops in county bays," he added.

According to the institute, scallop populations in Sarasota Bay and other areas along southwest are now much reduced from former high levels. To restore those numbers, Florida closed all state waters to commercial bay scallop fishing in 1994, and closed recreational scallop fishing south of the Suwannee River. The recreational harvest season was reduced to three months.

To track the SEA Team's progress, 15 scallop monitoring sites were established throughout the county. The traps from the monitoring stations are sent to the institute, where biologists count the number of scallop juveniles, known as spat. From May 2008-09, the stations attracted 2,425 bay scallops and 546 calico scallops. This was the first year that scallop monitoring was conducted in the county's bays. These numbers will serve as a baseline to gauge the SEA Team's restoration efforts.

To volunteer for the program and host a scallop site, contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 941-861-5000 and ask for the scallop seeding project.