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## Sarasota Environmental Aquatics Team receives Gulf Guardian award

The Sarasota Environmental Aquatics (SEA) Team has received a Gulf Guardian award from the Gulf of Mexico Program, a consortium of government agencies, scientists, environmentalists, fishing industry experts and representatives from the business and agricultural community. Every year, the program recognizes those who are taking positive steps to protect, restore and maintain the health and productivity of the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem in economically sustainable ways. Sarasota County's SEA Team received a second-place award in the government category.

Sarasota County has been collecting data on local seagrass since 2006. The data complements the biannual aerial seagrass mapping conducted by the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD). In 2007, program coordinators began enlisting the participation of local boaters who monitor locations throughout Sarasota County's bays. Today, the data is being used by county environmental managers to set water quality criteria. In 2008, the program was expanded to include a volunteer scallop monitoring project.

According to Environmental Specialist Amanda Dominguez, 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 to the state of Florida through the recreational and commercial fishing industries.

"The beds serve as nurseries for juvenile fish, scallops, crabs and shrimp," said Dominguez. "Manatees, sea turtles 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."

This is the second major award bestowed on the SEA Team. In June, it received a Best of Category award from the National Association of Counties. SEA Team coordinators also have been invited to help other local governments create their own seagrass programs.

The Gulf of Mexico Program is underwritten by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. For a list of all the 2009 Gulf Guardian Award winners, or for more information about the Gulf of Mexico Program, visit <http://www.epa.gov/gmpo>.

To participate in the next seagrass survey, or to learn more about Sarasota County's SEA Team, contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 941-861-5000 and ask for Amanda Dominguez.

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