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March is Seagrass Awareness Month

Florida waters contain the largest seagrass meadow in the world. Approximately 2.2 million acres of seagrass beds have been mapped in Florida waters, including more than 16,500 acres along the shores of Sarasota County.

According to 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 to the state of Florida from out-of-state and resident recreational and commercial fishermen.

Dominguez will host a free community presentation entitled "Seagrass: Sarasota's Marine Meadows" as part of Sarasota County's Beach University at 9:30 a.m., Wednesday, March 14, at the Siesta Key Beach Pavilion, 948 Beach Road, Sarasota.

Since 2006, Sarasota County has been mapping the area's seagrass beds to track their evolution.

"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 concern where seagrass beds are diminishing," said Dominguez. "The information gathered through this program allows us to identify seagrass trends and manage these systems appropriately."

The information gathered is critical 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; without it, most of the region's sea creatures habitat would be unstable shifting sand and mud," said Dominguez

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 seagrass blades, it often tears up the network of runners that anchors seagrass to the bottom and transports nutrients the plant needs," said Dominguez.

For more information, contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 861-5000 or visit www.scgov.net, keyword search Resource Protection.

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