

National Estuaries Days Cape Haze Paddling Trip Report - 11/16/08

By Karen Bickford, President of the Friends of the Charlotte Harbor Aquatic Preserve

Grande Tours in partnership with the Charlotte Harbor National Estuary Program and the Friends of the Charlotte Harbor Aquatic Preserve hosted a National Estuaries Days paddling event on Sunday, November 16, 2008 to highlight the importance of our estuaries. Of special interest to the Upper Charlotte Harbor basin in Placida is the Friends Annual National Estuaries Days Cape Haze Paddle.

The volunteers and participants started arriving at Grande Tours (12575 Placida Road, Placida, FL 33946) at 8:15am. The weather was windy, cold and sunny; a great day for kayaking although it can be challenging. Jaime Boswell had all of the paddlers registered well before the 9:00am scheduled launch. Meanwhile the Ed Engle and Joe Mullin (also Grande Tours employees and local kayakers) along with volunteer Karen Bickford were outfitting paddlers with kayaks, PFDs and paddles. It was a chaotic morning, but came together very well thanks to the helpful staff at Grande Tours and the great volunteers.

Once launched, the group of 12 participants and 2 guides and 2 safety-sweep kayakers up Coral Creek. Ed and Joe had planned to give the group a tour of Myakka Bay, but the torrential currents caused by the swift outgoing and exceptionally low tides and the strong wind was a challenge for the paddlers while still in the creek. The mangroves provided great shelter from the wind but the currents were more elusive and it was often difficult to find a place to allow the paddlers a break.

It was difficult to find a place to remain stationary to hold discussions while on the water. Ed found a nice calm area just upstream of Grande Tours where Karen gave a brief presentation on the Charlotte Harbor National Estuary Program, their mission and the importance of the conservation of natural ecosystems in Southwest Florida. Karen also briefly discussed kayaking safety and proper use of kayaking equipment.

On our breaks, we sat in awe while life quietly proceeded in our presence. Ed gave a discussion on the role of mangroves as wind protection and structure for the fisheries as well as a water quality improvement mechanism by way of filter feeders (oysters). He explained the significance of this structure with respect to our economy and how the importance to of mangroves by supporting such habitat improves water quality and that translates into our quality of life. Jaime answered questions about the gelatinous life forms on the muddy bottom of the tidal creeks as well as the gastropods going about their day as we glided quietly over them in the water above.

Toward the end of the tour we did attempt to go out into the bay area through the boat channel downstream of Grande Tours. The currents from the tide had not diminished but the wind was more tolerable. Traveling downstream through eddies caused by underwater obstructions and ongoing construction in the area reminded me of the thrill of white water kayaking. Edging that kayak to keep it in line and avoid pilings was a little scary, but sometimes that kind of challenge makes you think and for that mental exercise your day is more memorable.

The opening in the mangroves just around the corner presented shallow mudflats abutted to the deep boat channel. There was not much in the way of birds out on the water today, but one mudflat with what seemed like hundreds of ibis was reminiscent of a large Thanksgiving feast with the happy wading birds vigorously shell fishing.

After taking another break to investigate the mudflat, the group headed back to Grande Tours. The trip upstream against the current was quite a bit more difficult than downstream and some paddlers had what seemed like a tri-athlete's challenge in rapids to overcome the pushing tide going back out to the bay. Some paddlers did not have as difficult a time and stayed behind to cheer on their fellow kayakers as they worked their way upstream into calmer waters. Everyone had a grand time on their visit to Grande Tours. It was very refreshing to see that even though the trip was not perfect, the participants enjoyed what they saw, had a great time together and worked as a team to make the trip that much better.

About the Charlotte Harbor National Estuary Program and the Friends of the Charlotte Harbor Aquatic Preserve...

The Charlotte Harbor National Estuary Program (CHNEP) is one of 28 programs around the nation and part of a system that was established by Congress in 1987 under the Clean Water Act. The purpose of this program is to promote and restore the health of nationally significant estuaries, concurrently supporting the economic and recreational uses of the estuary's natural resources through public education and outreach. The CHNEP generously provides grant funding for the National Estuaries Days paddling events to provide access and knowledge about our local estuaries from Lemon Bay to Estero Bay.

Friends members and volunteers provide invaluable assistance and greatly benefit the Charlotte Harbor and the Preserves through trail construction and maintenance, exotic plant removal, Coastal Cleanups and National Estuaries Days educational paddling and wading events. The Friends represent the Preserve at local festivals, such as the Charlotte Harbor Nature Festival and the Calusa Blueway Paddling Festival. FCHAP provides ongoing financial support for Preserve programs such as the Charlotte Harbor Estuaries Volunteer Water Quality Monitoring Network and *Charlotte Harbor Soundings*, the Preserve newsletter to provide information and opportunities to the community. The Friends support Preserve staff to expand public education initiatives to inform recreational boaters and kayakers about estuarine fish and wildlife habitat loss in Charlotte Harbor and a call to action to provide volunteer assistance in activities related to estuarine habitat and water quality conservation.