

Celebrate the Twelfth Annual Seagrass Awareness Month

This March, the Governor and citizens of Florida acknowledge the twelfth annual Seagrass Awareness Month. As residents of the coastal communities, we should all take some time to become aware of what seagrass is and how it is beneficial not only to the marine environment but also our economy.

Seagrass is a vascular, flowering plant meaning it is much like the grass on your front lawn; receiving nutrients from an underground root system and the sun through photosynthesis. Seagrass is different than algae or seaweed, as they do not have true roots and acquire their nutrients directly through the water. Therefore, seagrass health and growth is highly dependent on the amount of sunlight it receives shining through the water. If there are excess nutrients (from fertilizers), tannins or colors, or suspended matter (think dirt) in the water, then this may prevent the necessary amount of light reaching the seagrass bed and cause die-offs. Excess nutrients can also cause harmful algal blooms which smother the seagrass beds, blocking the light and using up all the dissolved oxygen in the water.

Seagrass beds cover over 60,000 acres of the local southwest FL submerged bottoms, most of which are within the Charlotte Harbor Aquatic Preserves. These beds are highly productive ecosystems providing food and shelter for many marine and estuarine species. Seagrasses filter the water, take in nutrients and settle out suspended matter. They also provide dissolved oxygen and help with sediment stabilization. Did you know that over 70% of the important commercial and recreational species such as shrimp, snappers, gag grouper, and other shellfish spend a part, if not most, of their lives in seagrass beds? Because so many fish spend all or part of their life in seagrass beds, the seagrasses are an important basic resource for Florida's tourism industry. How are seagrasses doing? Coastal development and other pressures resulted in a loss of 24,500 acres (29%) of seagrass between 1945 and 1982 in the Charlotte Harbor region (excluding Lemon and Estero Bays). More recently, the seagrasses have stabilized and any annual losses are attributed to high rainfall through river and storm water outflow into the estuary. Such freshwater influence can be harmful in large quantities or duration as it usually contains higher levels of nutrients, color and suspended matter which reduces the needed sunlight. Other contributing factors to seagrass decline include dredging and filling activities and seagrass scarring from boat propellers. These activities may directly impact seagrass beds and certain species of seagrass can take 5-10 years to recover from a propeller scar, especially if it is in a high traffic area. Your boat and motor can be damaged by running in shallow waters, and propeller scarring may result in fines as well.

How can I help the seagrass? One of the most important steps to help the estuary and in turn the seagrass and fish is to limit the amount of fertilizers and herbicides applied to your lawn especially in the rainy, summer months. Even in canal systems, the runoff will eventually make its way out to the estuary. When boating, use a navigational chart and avoid shallow seagrass beds. In shallow waters, trim your motor to avoid cutting and uprooting seagrass plants. If aground, shut off your engine, tilt your motor up and pole or push out to deeper water.

If you would like more information on seagrasses in the Charlotte Harbor Aquatic Preserves, please visit:

<http://www.dep.state.fl.us/coastal/sites/charlotte/research/seagrass.htm> OR

<http://www.dep.state.fl.us/coastal/habitats/seagrass/>

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