



Vol. 24, No. 1

March, 2022

<http://www.HomosassaRiverAlliance.org>

Message From the President:

Hello Everyone, 2021 is in the rear view mirror, and 2022 is out in front, offering us opportunities to protect and ensure the health of the Homosassa River and it's Blue Waters. I have never felt more optimistic about the future of our outstanding waterway.

The efforts of the past few years focusing on Boater Education, River Restoration, Water Quality, Manatee Protection and increased Law Enforcement have all brought much needed additional attention to the needs of the river.

The Do Not Dump Scallop Shells program continues to educate and instruct scallopers in the proper way to discard their empty shells. The River Restoration Project, funded by the State, has provided millions of dollars for the removal of muck, algae and debris from the river bottom enhancing the planting and growth of aquatic vegetation. This vegetation provides excellent habitat for manatees, aquatic animals and fishery.

The Spring Cove Sewer Project has received funding and moved up in the installation que. Once completed, this project will bring the much needed reduction of waste water into our river.

The County now recognizes the need for additional law enforcement on the river and it's Blue Waters during peak times of the year. The State is reviewing a recent request to lower the speed limit between Monkey Island, and the Halls River, to further protect our increasing manatee population.

The Nature Coast Aquatic Preserve, created in 2020, protects our coastal seagrass meadows, which provide habitat for many varieties of fish that migrate into our river during the cooler months of the year.

All of the above could not have been accomplished without the combined efforts of the members of the Homosassa River Alliance, Homosassa River Restoration Project, River Warriors, and concerned citizens.

2022 will offer the opportunity to request from the State, additional protection for the Blue Waters which I consider the spring run of the Homosassa. State law now directs the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) to establish spring protection zones that prohibit anchoring, mooring, beaching or grounding of vessels, or restrict the speed and operation of vessels to prevent harm to certain springs, spring groups, and their associated spring runs. I know of no other spring run which deserves this protection more than the Blue Waters. I look forward to pursuing this protection in the year to come in order to carry on this success, and enhance the health of our outstanding waterway.

The voice and views of concerned citizens need to be heard by and presented to the proper government entities. Your membership and support of the HRA will continue to make this happen. If you know of any person or persons that have not joined the HRA, please have them consider doing so. PEOPLE MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

Looking forward to seeing you.

Frank Kapocsi III

HRA Membership Dues:

The River Alliance is forging along on many projects. One in particular was the Citrus County Science Fair in January where we judged projects which addressed water issues. Awards were given for the top two projects at our March meeting. Your dues help finance this awards. Please remember to renew your membership which comes due January 1st of each year. Check the address label of this newsletter, looking at the 4 digit number to the left of your name. This number gives you the last year you paid dues. Thank you.

Rosey Rendueles
HRA Treasurer

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A group of local citizens gathered in 2020 to address the speed zone on the Homosassa River from Monkey Island to Marker 7. The following is an update of their efforts.

Obtaining a Year-Round Slow Speed Designation
From Monkey Island to Marker 7
Sue Pagano

The latest news on the effort to obtain a year-round slow speed designation from Monkey Island to Marker 7 came from FWC's Ron Mezich and was confirmed by Citrus County Commissioner Ron Kitchen at a recent HRA meeting. The county is developing an ordinance which will create a year-round slow speed zone for the stretch of the Homosassa River that is under discussion. This option is most likely the quickest way to modify the speed zone on the river. Under the Florida Manatee Sanctuary Act, municipalities are able to create manatee speed zones, with some exceptions, as long as the zone meets the Florida Statute's requirements. The ordinance will accomplish this and once created, the more restrictive zone will be posted and enforced. FWC staff will FWC and the County. FWC manatee speed zones are created by rule and governed by a statutory process which under the best circumstances will take a year to complete and it is possible it could take significantly longer. BOCC public hearings which are required are in progress.

The process is anticipated to be completed by spring 2022.

Contact Sue Pagano (suepagano@verizon.net) if you have questions.

ANNUAL PICNIC

WHERE: OLD HOMOSASSA CIVIC CLUB

WHEN: APRIL 14, 2022 @ 4 P.M.

WHY: INDUCTION OF NEW OFFICERS

Main dish and drinks will be provided. Please bring a covered dish to share.

Update: Homosassa River Restoration Project (HRRP)

Steve Minguay

November 15, 2021 was the end of the restoration project's first complete year of in-water work. Due to FWC manatee restrictions we are not allowed to work from November 15 through April 1. Progress remains steady and successful results are beginning to be realized.

Project results to date:

- 34,000 Cubic Yards of material removed
- 21 Spring Vents opened
- 13.56 Acres of Phase 1 Restored
- 1,004 Herbivory Exclusion Cages installed.
- 74,495 Eelgrass Units planted

HRRP will have divers back in the water on April 01, 2022. Restoration will begin in the main river from Mitten Cove (small cove next to the Homosassa State Park) and will continue downriver as quickly as time, Mother Nature, and funding allow. Plans for 2022 also include the completion of permitting for Phases 2 and 3 which will permit the project up to the confluence of the Homosassa and Halls River's. Permitting for Phase 4 will begin in 2022 as well. Phase 4 includes the river up to the Halls River Rd bridge (in front of Margarita Grill Restaurant), the adjoining canals, and the Homosassa River downstream to where it narrows and enters the Catherine's Bay area.

Permitting of Phase 5, which is basically all of Catherine's Bay, is dependent upon the slow speed ordinance passing. Our biologists have advised us that it would be extremely difficult to grow grass in the section of river where many large fast-moving boats turn the water to a silt/mud slurry during the summer months. Growing grass in such conditions would be almost impossible and the danger to divers unacceptable.

Preliminary studies will also begin in 2022 of some of the Old Homosassa - Mason Creek canals. The studies will let HRRP know if dredging and planting of some or all of these canals is feasible and the associated costs.

HRRP Board Members, Citrus County Commissioner's, and other concerned citizens of Citrus County were in Tallahassee in January lobbying hard for funding for this project and the implementation of policies to further protect the Homosassa River. Those efforts will hopefully pay off in the coming months.

If you have some free time, check out the display of garbage, some of it quite unique (look for the pogo stick), that our divers have removed from the river. The display case is located in the Homosassa State Park Main Visitor Center on SR 19. Access to that part of the building is free.

****As you boat this summer, PLEASE BE AWARE OF DIVERS WORKING UNDERWATER.****



**Community Voices Are Key to Management of
Florida's Nature Coast Aquatic Preserve.**
The PEW Charitable Trusts

Florida's Nature Coast Aquatic Preserve, created in June 2020, spans more than 700 square miles along the coasts of Citrus, Hernando, and Pasco counties and protects coastal habitat, including part of the Gulf of Mexico's largest seagrass meadow, as well as sponge fields, mangrove forests, oyster reefs, and salt marshes. These ecosystems provide habitat for a vast array of marine animals and form the backbone of the region's coastal economy. More than 100 coastal businesses and nine recreational fishing and marine industry organizations backed establishment of the preserve, which hosts summertime scalloping, world-renowned fishing and manatee watching, and other activities that generate more than \$600 million annually for local communities, provide over 10,000 jobs, and support about 500 businesses.

Each of Florida's 42 aquatic preserves has a management plan that is tailored to provide managers and local communities with a roadmap for effective stewardship and must strike a balance between human uses and conservation needs. The Nature Coast preserve plan will determine how managers conserve its seagrass, mangrove islands, salt marsh, oysters, sponges, corals, and other assets and will outline monitoring and restoration necessary to identify and address changes in water quality and habitats that could result from any proposed land-based development or other human activities.

As state environmental officials begin the process of developing a plan to oversee the preserve, regional stakeholders and the public will have a chance to help shape the plan and ensure protections for water quality, wildlife, habitats, and the boating, fishing, scalloping, and other traditional activities they support. Diverse public input is key to the success of the plan, which will guide the preserve's future and leave a legacy for generations to come.

All of Florida's aquatic preserves share some common rules, including requirements to protect water quality. The Nature Coast Aquatic Preserve also is an "Outstanding Florida Water," a designation that is assigned to areas worthy of special safeguards and mandates the state's highest level of water quality protection. In addition to the standard rules, each preserve can have programs, research, monitoring, and other guidelines tailored for it. Important elements of the Nature Coast preserve plan could include:

- Baseline assessments
- Seagrass and water quality monitoring programs
- Boater education and outreach
- Habitat restoration

The Nature Coast Aquatic Preserve has the potential to protect the vital habitats and good water quality necessary to secure the way of life for local communities well into the

future. Fishermen, boaters, eco-tourism operators, and other stakeholders will play an important role in the development and implementation of a management plan to best realize that potential. Long-term community support and engagement will ensure the preserve can effectively safeguard this special place, its resources, and the communities that rely on them. **Please see graphic on p. 7 illustrating the aquatic preserve.**

UF/IFAS Scientists Help Preserve Nature Coast, One Sample At A Time

Samantha Murray

Last summer and fall, UF/IFAS scientists collected data on water quality and seagrass in the recently created Nature Coast Aquatic Preserve, which includes waters off Citrus, Hernando and Pasco counties.

These data is available through a public database that environmental managers and other scientists can access and analyze.

Trends in water quality and seagrass help scientists, managers and local stakeholders understand how best to conserve natural resources.

Scalloping season began in July on the Nature Coast. As people flocked to the state's west coast in search of the prized shellfish, scientists with the University of Florida were in the water, though instead of collecting scallops they were after data points.

"The data collected provides insight into the health of the ecosystem in which scallops and many other species live," said Savanna Barry, regional specialized agent with UF/IFAS Extension Florida Sea Grant based at the Nature Coast Biological Station in Cedar Key. There are more than 40 aquatic preserves in Florida, Barry said. These natural resources are sensitive to changes in nutrients, light levels and seagrass growth. But these changes happen over time, so scientists take regular samples to understand larger trends that may affect the region.

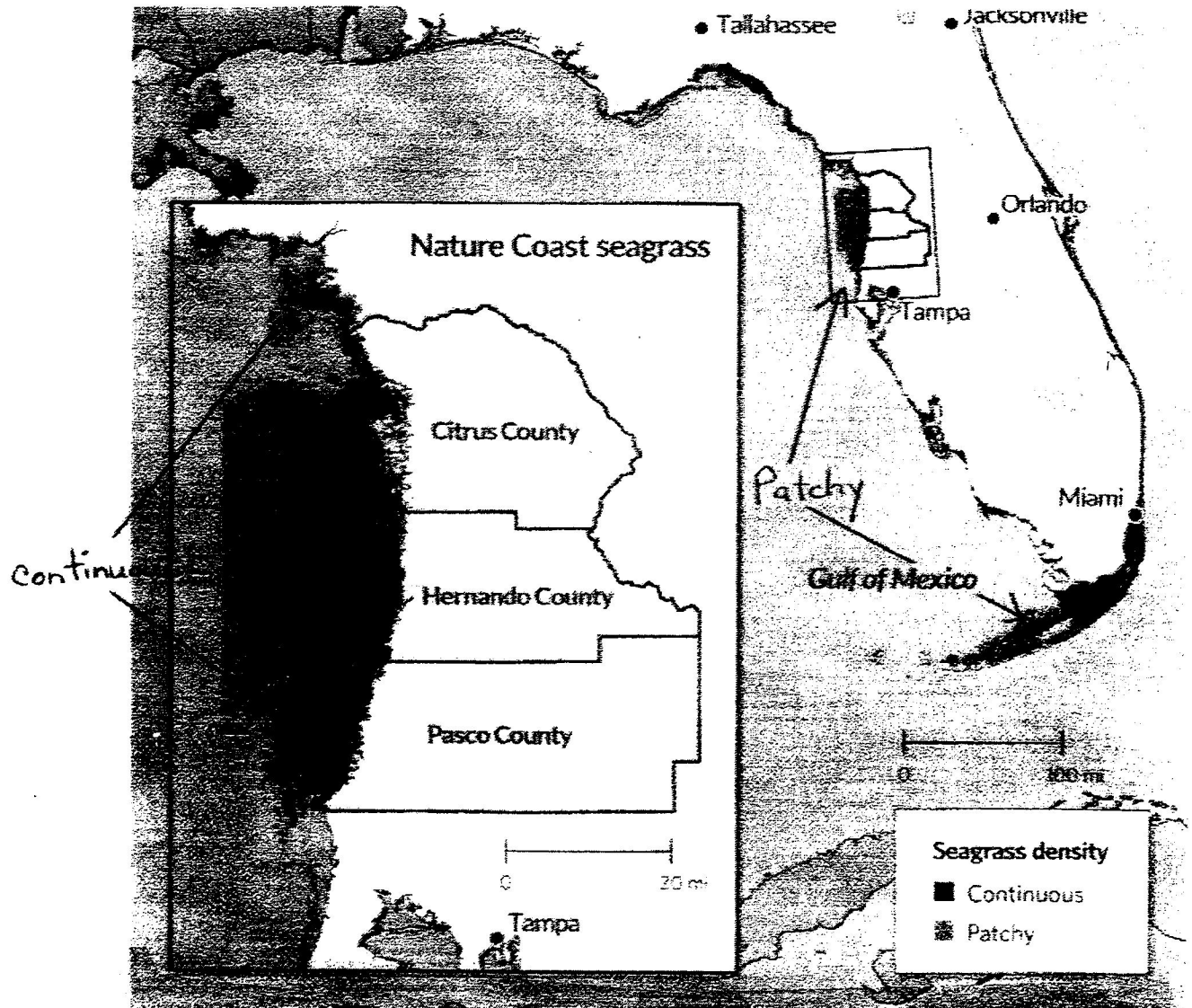
With support from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and The Pew Charitable Trusts, over the next several months UF/IFAS scientists and graduate students will sample water and seagrass in the recently created Nature Coast Aquatic Preserve, located off Citrus, Hernando and Pasco Counties. More than 400,000 acres. the preserve supports one of the largest seagrass beds in the country as well as other important marine habitats such as saltmarsh and oyster reefs.

"Our seagrass beds are what really sets this area apart, and without our estuaries and seagrass, the fishery can't thrive. They are the building blocks," said Captain Dan Clymer, a fishing guide based in Crystal River, Florida.

Samantha is a senior public relations specialist at UF/IFAS Communications. She loves learning about and communicating science.

Florida Plays Host to Abundant Seagrass

Nature Coast provides ideal habitat for bountiful underwater meadows



Florida boasts more than 2.5 million acres of seagrass, including the largest continuous beds in the country. This map depicts known areas of seagrass, which extend at least 14 miles offshore. Scientists have not yet mapped potential areas farther out. Seagrass is light-loving and generally exists close to land in shallow water, but along Florida's Nature Coast, it is able to grow abundantly in deeper waters farther offshore because the ocean floor slopes gently and the water is clear.

Source: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (216-218), <http://geodatemyfwc.com/datasets/seagrass-habitat-in-florida>

Note: I recall visiting the home of Ron Schultz years ago for a River Alliance Meeting. Ron was serving as president of the Alliance at that time. He took me into his office and on the wall was a map of Florida. Ron shared with me the fact that he had been trying for years to bring attention to the fact that a portion of the Florida coastline was not protected. It was his hope that this would change. The Pew Charitable Trust contacted HRA president, Frank Kaposci in 2018 and the "wheels began to turn" to accomplish this endeavor. So our thanks to Mr. Schultz and the Pew Trust that this stretch of Florida coastline is now part of the Nature Coast Aquatic Preserve. Iris Rose