Florida Bay Connections

Located at the southernmost tip of the Florida peninsula, Florida Bay lies between the mainland and the chain of islands known as the Florida Keys. The Keys, and the Florida reef tract extend 220 miles south and west of the Florida peninsula. The islands were formed from ancient coral and sand shoals which are covered by mangroves and tropical hardwood hammocks. The bay itself is characterized by many shallow interconnected basins, with an average depth of only three feet. The Bay and the Keys are part of the greater South Florida ecosystem, one that is unique to the world.

Today, the South Florida ecosystem is a shell of what it used to be. During the past 60 years, development and an influx of people have put the ecosystem under stress. Signs include extremely high salinity, large blooms of algae and expanses of dead seagrass. The current condition of Florida Bay is the result of greater environmental problems occurring throughout the entire South Florida ecosystem that have drawn attention from local, state and national agencies. Coordinated research is now underway to characterize and pinpoint the problems associated with the region's decline, and to formulate restoration plans for Florida Bay.

Florida Bay is:

✓ an estuary where freshwater from the Everglades meets and mixes with salt water from the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean.

✓ about 3200 years old and approximately 850 square miles in size.

✓ the primary nursery ground for the Tortugas pink shrimp - a $59 million Florida industry, a $26 million spiny lobster fishery, a $10.1 million stone crab fishery, and a $3.5 million snapper industry.

✓ supporting a $72 million recreational industry in the Florida Keys comprised of fishing, diving and kayaking.

✓ host to approximately 120 species of wading birds.

✓ home to seven kinds of seagrass which serve as permanent habitat or nursery grounds for more than 100 species of fish and 30 species of crustacea.

✓ a haven for 90 percent of Florida’s nesting roseate spoonbill, great white heron, reddish egret and white-crowned pigeon populations.

✓ a sanctuary for endangered or threatened species, including: the American crocodile; the West Indian manatee; the Peregrin falcon; the bald eagle; and the Green, Hawksbill and Kemp’s Ridley sea turtles.
Florida Bay Research Facts

- Millions of dollars are being invested in Florida Bay research to provide resource managers with scientific data and analyses about current and past conditions of the Bay. This information will be used to develop strategic restoration recommendations and plans for this ecosystem.

- Current topics under investigation include water circulation, water quality, nutrients, plant communities, historical conditions and animal interactions.

- Nine federal, state, and local agencies and 26 universities and colleges from 14 states are involved in a coordinated research effort for Florida Bay.

- Computer models being developed by scientists and engineers predict the effects of proposed restoration actions on Bay wildlife and water quality.

Florida Bay Restoration

Ecosystem restoration goals include efforts to:

1) restore the natural water flow of South Florida;
2) enhance and recover native habitats and species;
3) revitalize urban areas in order to reduce the outward growth of suburbs and improve quality of life in these urban core areas.

Restoration problems include:

1) continued human population growth resulting in commercial and residential development extending into the Everglades ecosystem;
2) the reduction or elimination of freshwater flow into the Bay due to the labyrinth of locks and canals designed to reduce flooding in the developed areas;
3) the demise of native habitats and animals, the invasion of non-native species, and increased water quality problems also stemming from the loss of freshwater inflow.

To help conserve South Florida's ecosystems try:

1) reducing water use;
2) using native plants for landscaping;
3) practicing minimum impact boating;
4) becoming involved by contacting local elected officials or one of the organizations listed in this publication.
Florida Bay Education Project

The Florida Bay Education Project is sponsored by the Florida Sea Grant College Program and the University of Florida Cooperative Extension Service through a grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Coastal Ocean Program, and by the National Marine Fisheries Service, and the Florida Marine Research Institute. The project is designed to provide information to South Florida residents and visitors about Florida Bay issues, research, and resources.

To learn more about the Florida Bay Education Project and other Sea Grant initiatives, visit our website at:

www.FlSeaGrant.org/FLBAY.HTM

Or contact the project office directly at:

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On-Line Resources

- Florida Bay and Adjacent Marine Systems Science Program
  www.aoml.noaa.gov/flbay/

- South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force
  www.sfrestore.org

- Everglades National Park:
  www.nps.gov/ever/eco/fbrp.htm

- South Florida Water Management District: www.sfwmd.gov

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