Late 19th century mariners sailing along Southwest Florida's shore encountered few settlements. Population was sparse on the barrier islands, the eastern shore of Charlotte Harbor, Estero Bay, and Naples Bay and in the Caloosahatchee valley. Prior to the arrival of the railroad in Punta Gorda (1886) and the Big Freeze of 1892, only a few dozen persons lived on the islands and along the shore in this region.

Range cattle roamed freely over wide areas from the Myakka River south. During the Civil War, Southwest Florida was a prime source of beef for the Confederate army. Afterwards, and until about 1878, the primary market was Cuba. Cattle were shipped from Punta Gorda and Punta Rassa.

During the pre-development period, bay and Gulf fishing was in the hands of Cubans who often employed Native Americans as deckhands and established seasonal fish camps on islands all along this stretch of the Gulf coast: Lacosta, Mondongo, Pelau, Punta Blanca, Useppa, Captiva, Sanibel, Estero, Mound, Black, Little Hickory, and Marco. Cuban fishermen dried and salted muller for the Cuban market, living in "ranchos" or palmetto-thatched houses. These fishing stations existed for more than three centuries, beginning in the late 1600s. The arrival of the railroad at Punta Gorda in 1886 and establishment of an ice factory there in 1893 opened up the domestic United States fresh fish market to local fishermen. More than 20 icehouses, from Charlotte Harbor to Estero Bay, were built to hold the day's fresh catch, which was collected by run boats and transported to Punta Gorda for shipment north. The local fisher-folk culture gradually changed as Cubans either assimilated into local Florida families or returned permanently to Cuba.

Production of naval stores and logging were other important local industries that followed the railroads into the region. Turpentine camps, or "stills," operated from remote locations, oftentimes using forced, convict laborers.

The 1890s witnessed the rapid introduction of the citrus industry as north Florida growers reestablished groves in the region below the frost-free line, producing citrus in the Caloosahatchee valley, along the shores of Estero Bay and Naples Bay, and on Marco Island. Before railroads, getting products to market and providing settlers with supplies meant reliance on inland water transport. Steamers and sailing schooners hauled fruit and vegetables north to Punta Gorda and returned south with grain and other supplies.

The arrival of the railroad in 1904 at Ft. Myers caused a boom in the local economy. Ft. Myers became the distribution and commercial center for Southwest Florida. The railroad offered northern tourists unrestricted access to winter vacation locales. Guest homes and hotels were established in the major towns. By the turn of the century, Punta Gorda and Ft. Myers each had between 1,200 and 1,500 inhabitants. The sparsely settled conditions and extensive land use during this pre-development period are reflected in Map 1-A, C, E, G, and I.

There is a striking difference between the pre-development waterfront use of the 1858-1944 period and that of the bayside and barrier islands in the 1990s (Map 1-B, D, F, H, and J). Table 1 summarizes the major changes in land use and land cover bordering this 253-square-mile shoreline area from pre-development to modern eras. The most dramatic change visible on Map 1A-J is the phenomenal urban development: the 1-square-mile aggregate urban area of the 1890s grew to 81 square miles by the 1990s, an 8,100-percent increase. Another discernible change during this period is the decline in vegetated uplands (forest, shrub, and brushland), a 76-percent decrease from 46 to 28 square miles.

### Land use and land cover bordering the Southwest Florida shoreline: Pre-development era and 1990s.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Land Use and Land Cover</th>
<th>Pre-development*</th>
<th>Contemporary</th>
<th>Change (percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(miles)*</td>
<td>(percent)</td>
<td>(miles)**</td>
<td>(percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wetland and Mangroves</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>135</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vegetated Upland</td>
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<td>46</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barren</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**
* U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, T-Sheets No. 693, 738, 739, 853, 854, 855, 856, 1048, 1554a, 1554b, 2122, 2123, 2126, 4289, H/T-Sheets No. 5067, 5072, and 1944 aerial photography covering Estero Bay.  
** South Florida Water Management District and Southwest Florida Water District, 1995.  
Southwest Florida once shared a heritage of natural resources as bountiful and awe-inspiring as any region of America. Its heritage reflects the geological history, geographic location and biological evolution of the United States’ only humid and sub-tropical peninsula. Coastal waters abounded with fish, rumored to impede the progress of sailing ships and rowboats. Birds were so numerous as to eclipse the sun when their flocks took wing. Naval stores of pine, cypress and oak seemed without limit. Not that the region was a benign Eden. Mosquitoes swarmed after sudden rains in numbers sufficient to kill livestock. Wild cats, venomous snakes, alligators, bears, sharks and other wildlife were elements of everyday life for explorers and settlers.
1. **Placida** is the Spanish word for “placid,” an apt term to describe Placida Harbor, located at the mouth of Coral Creek and at the north end of Gasparilla Sound, with access to the Gulf through Gasparilla Pass. The town originated with a bunkhouse of the Charlotte Harbor & Northern Railroad — locals called it the “Cold, Hungry and Naked” line — later supplemented by relocation of the Gasparilla fishing village. It has been a major commercial fishing center for decades. Today, with the impact of the commercial fishing gill net ban in 1995, most of the fishing activities in the area have been curtailed and many of the stores closed, although some shops and a restaurant are still in operation.

2. **Cayo Pelau** is a 140-acre island west of Bull Bay and fronting Charlotte Harbor. The island’s settlement dates to the Calusa Indian period. It was occupied by Cuban fishermen during the 19th century. An 1832 expedition describes a Spanish-speaking (Cuban) settlement “…from 60 to 70 inhabitants who keep an abundance of hogs, dogs innumerable.” The term “Pelau” is West Indian Spanish jargon for “bald spot,” aptly describing the center of the island’s wet–dry marsh, surrounded by gumbo limbo and mangrove trees.

3. **Gasparilla Island** is bounded on the north by Gasparilla Pass, on the east by Gasparilla Sound, on the south by Boca Grande (Pass) and on the west by the Gulf of Mexico. The island was sparsely settled by fishing families until the late 19th century. The federal government in 1848 established a military reservation at Boca Grande, including both the southern end of Gasparilla Island and the northern end of Lacosta Island. A lighthouse was built and placed in operation in 1890.

   Construction began on a port facility and railroad spur to receive and ship phosphate ore mined in the Peace River Valley in 1905. The railroad provided access to the outside world. Fish houses were established along the rail line, which brought in ice from the mainland (Punta Gorda) and shipped out fresh fish. The fish house at the north end of the island developed into Gasparilla Village. The railroad also attracted land investors. The Gasparilla Inn opened in 1911 as a resort hotel, and Boca Grande was on its way to become an upscale community catering to affluent winter visitors and sports fishermen. Homes on Gilchrist and Park Avenues date back to this early development period. Storm-induced beach recession in the 1920s required the railroad to be shifted eastward. Fill dredged from the bay bottom along the east shore created Loomis Key. Boaters now use the dredged channel when transiting north from Grande Bayou to Gasparilla Sound. The Boca Grande Causeway, providing road connection to Placida, was built in 1958. In the late 1970s, the Port Boca Grande docks and storage facilities were found in need of extensive repairs and were abandoned in favor of shipping ore from the Peace River mines directly by rail to Tampa. The Boca Grande rail spur right of way became a bicycle path, and Port Boca Grande became an oil storage depot.

   The lighthouse was retired from service in 1966 when automated channel navigation lights were installed. The old lighthouse became a site on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980. The U.S. Coast Guard recommissioned the light in 1986, and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection manages the park facilities. The lighthouse is now the location of a historical museum.
Map 1-A.
Pre-development conditions along the barrier islands.
4. Lacosta Island (Cayo Costa) is a barrier island situated south of Boca Grande and north of Captiva Pass. The number of Indian shell mounds on the island indicates human habitation dates far back in the pre-Discovery period. The island was used periodically by Cubans during the 19th century as a base for fishing in Charlotte Harbor and nearby Gulf waters. In 1880, the original (1848) land parcel acquired as a military reservation by the federal government (see Gasparilla Island note above) was modified, and a limited area along the Boca Grande shore was set aside for military purposes, a pilot station, and a marine hospital. The federal government relinquished control of this property in 1938. Lacosta Island retained a quasi-clandestine reputation, even when ostensibly under federal control. It was a base for smuggling operations, especially rum from Cuba during the Prohibition, and is reported to have had a house of ill fame frequented by fishermen and sailors from the many Cuban fishing smacks that frequented the harbor at the turn of the century.

The feral hogs on the island were vestige of the island’s past and accounted for the numerous trails through the impenetrable cabbage-palm forest. A number of residences remain on the island: some are in an abandoned state, others are maintained as fishing retreats. Lee County, in 1959, established a park on the northern 640 acre parcel. This park was turned over to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection in the early 1980s.

5. Useppa Island was settled by the ancestors of Calusa Indians thousands of years ago. Fort Casey was established here during the Seminole Wars, but was short-lived. A fishing community, called “Guisepe,” later developed on the island. During the Civil War, a Union naval station garrisoned here to protect refugees and curtail the smuggling of provisions to the Confederacy. Useppa’s modern post-19th century history stems from its purchase by John Roach, president of the Chicago Street Railway Company, who built a home and small hotel, the Useppa Inn, where he entertained friends and business associates Henry Ford and Thomas Edison by fishing for tarpon during the winter months. Barron Collier bought the property in 1911 for his Florida residence. Today, the former Collier Mansion is the site of the Useppa Island Club and the island has been developed into an exclusive residential community.

6. Cabbage Key This island in Pine Island Sound, just west of Useppa, is 100 acres upon which is a resort, marina and restaurant. The resort is built atop a 38-foot-high Native American shell mound. The island is easy to locate because of the tall water tower, which provides visitors and guests a panoramic view of the bays and Gulf of Mexico. The resort was once the home of novelist Mary Roberts Rinehart. Contemporary novelist Randy Wayne White describes Cabbage Key as having “an oasis feel to it, sitting out there all by itself, like it could have been Abaco or Tangiers or Caicos, soaking up the sun through the decades while travelers tromped up the shell path to the old house on the mound.”
7. Pine Island consists of three settlements. At the north tip of the island is Bokeelia, on the south shore of Charlotte Harbor; Pineland is to the south on the east shore of Pine Island Sound; and St. James City at the southern tip of the island abuts San Carlos Bay. Pineland is home to the Randell Research Center — devoted to learning and teaching the archaeology, history, and ecology of Southwest Florida — owes this distinction in part to Calusa Indian shell mounds or middens (ancient Indian garbage dumps) located along the island’s shore overlooking Pine Island Sound. There are remnants of an aboriginal canoe canal, dug by the Calusa or their ancestors, probably 500 to 1,000 years ago. The “haul-over” canal had its western terminus at Pineland and extended eastward to Matlacha Pass, ending at Indian Field. In 1912, when Army Engineers visited the region, Pineland town consisted of a post office and three or four houses, but no streets or roads. The early 20th century settlement developed from turpentine stills and sawmills on north Pine Island. Today, all three communities provide recreational, sport fishing, eco-tourism, agricultural, and residential services.

8. North Captiva and Captiva Islands were one island prior to the 1921 hurricane and the creation of Redfish Pass. Major storms in the 1920s, ‘30s, and ‘40s overtopped the low, narrow southern end of North Captiva. Safety Harbor, the small embayment inside Captiva Pass, was a fish camp during the pre-development period. A surge of vacation-home construction, beginning in the 1960s, along with finger-canal construction, has occurred on North Captiva Island. The State of Florida in 1975 acquired about half of the island, which has been designated a Barrier Island Preserve. South Seas, a destination marina and golfing resort, is at the north end of Captiva Island. The town of Captiva is at the center, adjacent to Roosevelt Channel, a present-day popular anchorage and relict inlet channel to Blind Pass. It is hard to imagine that the town claimed only 45 inhabitants just prior to World War II.