



The Coastal Program in the Florida Panhandle *Caring for Our Coastal Habitats*

Overview

The Coastal Program in the Florida Panhandle began its work in 2001 – one of a nationwide network of 22 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service programs established to protect, restore, and enhance coastal habitat. We serve 16 counties in northwest Florida, which include 250 miles of shore line along the Gulf of Mexico. This fringe of bays and estuaries supports hundreds of species of wildlife, including the federally protected Gulf sturgeon, Florida manatee, piping plover, beach mice, and sea turtles. Also, our coastal upland areas feature an ecologically rare and fragile system of coastal dune lakes.

Accomplishments 2001-2006

Restored/Enhanced

- 5141 acres of coastal wetlands
- 7744 acres of coastal uplands
- 109 miles of coastal shoreline

Protected

- 10 acres of coastal habitat
- 115 warning markers for 1200 acres of seagrass

28 partnership agreements

Priorities

We are emphasizing living shorelines – salt marsh, seagrass, oyster reef, tidal flat, and dune habitats. These important components of the coastal environment perform valuable ecological services, such as nutrient cycling, sediment stabilization, wave attenuation, and nursery and foraging habitat for fish and invertebrates. While

living shorelines improve water quality, create habitat, and enhance natural processes, hardened shorelines armored with bulkheads or seawalls do the opposite, leading to dead shorelines. Educating the public about the importance of living shorelines is key. We want to encourage their creation and restoration as the primary means for protecting eroding shorelines in the Panhandle. Our goal is to steer coastal protection efforts away from hardening towards soft alternatives, to make living shorelines the method of choice for shoreline protection. We are focusing primarily on an area that includes five bay systems from Perdido Bay west thru Apalachicola Bay, covering more than 3,000 square miles.

Threats

Associated with our valuable coastal resources are densely developed urban areas. Historic and ongoing activities such as dredging, filling, industrial practices, silviculture, and



photo: USFWS

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agriculture have all altered native habitats and resulted in loss of seagrass beds, marshes, river flood plains, and coastal upland forests. Coastal areas are the first line of defense against hurricanes, and their good health greatly benefits people as well as wildlife.

no longer function naturally. Restoration of altered habitats and preservation of existing pristine habitat is our highest priority.

Conservation Strategies

The Coastal Program of the Florida Panhandle is incentive-based, seeking to accomplish on-the-ground results through partnerships with government agencies and private groups. Any type of habitat in the coastal mosaic may be the focus of a restoration, enhancement, or protection project to benefit fish and wildlife, or to reduce watershed threats. We meet our objectives by:

- Leveraging funds with other partner contributions to maximize results for each Coastal Program dollar spent.

Some of Our Partners

- Apalachicola Bay and Riverkeeper
- Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance
- City of Lynn Haven
- Eglin Air Force Base
- Florida Department of Environmental Protection
- Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
- Florida State University
- Friends of St. Andrew State Park
- Gulf Islands National Seashore
- The Nature Conservancy
- Northwest Florida Water Management District
- St. Andrew Bay Environmental Study Team
- St. Andrew Bay Resource Management Association
- St. Vincent and St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge
- University of Florida
- West Florida Regional Planning Council

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Seagrass meadows, which have declined more than 70% in some areas, are particularly vulnerable to the impacts from development. Threats to these vital habitats include stormwater runoff containing debris and contaminants, increased nutrient loads, propeller damage caused by careless boaters, dredge and fill projects, and coastal construction. Development in the Panhandle has also severely impacted our rare dune lakes to the extent that most

- Developing on-the-ground projects and providing technical assistance on both private and public lands, tapping into local community interest and serving as a catalyst to mobilize conservation efforts;
- Creating partnerships that include federal, state, and local governments, academic institutions, non-governmental organizations, conservation groups, businesses, and citizen volunteers;

For More Information

For more information about the Coastal Program in the Florida Panhandle, contact Melody Ray-Culp, Coastal Program Coordinator, at 850-769-0552 or visit us on the internet at <http://www.fws.gov/coastal/>

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