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## **Monroe County Observes Seagrass Awareness Month**

**Key West --** Monroe County Mayor Wilhelmina Harvey has declared May "Seagrass Awareness Month," to focus attention on the important role that seagrasses play in the environment and economy of the Florida Keys.

"Both residents and visitors tend to think of the coral reef when they think of the marine environment of the Florida Keys. But our coral reef and the creatures that live there depend on healthy seagrass beds to thrive," said Harvey. "Healthy seagrass is critical to the tourism and fishing industries, the cornerstones of our economy."

The marine environment of the Florida Keys includes vast meadows of seagrass, primarily turtle grass (*Thalassia testudinum*), manatee grass (*Syringodium filiforme*), and shoal grass (*Halodule wrightii*). These grasses require sunlight and low nutrient levels in the water to grow. In deeper waters, paddle grass (*Halophila decipiens*), which requires less light, dominates.

Seagrass beds serve as nurseries for juvenile fish, lobster, crabs and shrimp that later move offshore. They provide homes for threatened and endangered species such as the queen conch and the Bahama star. Larger animals, such as manatees, turtles, sharks and rays, forage in the seagrass, feeding on the plants themselves or on the smaller creatures that live there. Seagrass also helps to maintain water quality, serving as a filter and anchoring sediments.

Declining water quality and chronic damage by boaters pose major threats to seagrass beds in the Florida Keys. Seagrass Awareness Month is the culmination of an interagency effort to raise awareness

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of the important role seagrass plays in the Keys coral reef ecosystem and the threats it faces. During the month, public service announcements on local radio stations and TCI's NOAA weather channel will focus on the importance of seagrass to the Florida Keys and describe ways boaters can help protect the grass beds.

The television program *Waterways* will feature episodes that describe the impact boat groundings and prop scars have on the seagrass and provide tips on vessel operation. Sponsored by the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, Everglades National Park and the United States Environmental Protection Agency, the show airs Mondays and Friday at 7:30 p.m. on TCI channel five.

The interagency group, known as the Seagrass Summit Outreach Partnership, also has developed a "tool box" of educational materials for distribution to government agencies, nonprofit organizations and educational institutions. The kit includes a video, brochures and other publications, fact sheets, photos of grass beds and prop scarring, sample PSAs and a campaign logo.

"Seagrass Awareness Month marks the beginning of our campaign, not the end. We hope that other groups will use the tools we've developed to continue to raise awareness of the importance of healthy seagrass to the Florida Keys," said Pamala Wingrove of Florida Sea Grant, one of eight agencies assisting with the campaign.

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