



Boating Brings Fun and Responsibility

by Dianne Berger

University of Florida/Monroe County Cooperative Extension
Florida Bay Education Project

As the winter season approaches, the Florida Keys become home to many nesting migratory birds including bald eagles, ospreys, pelicans, roseate spoonbills, and the ever increasing population of snowbirds.

According to Monroe County population statistics, the human population of the Florida Keys increases nearly 50% each year during the winter season. With the addition of seasonal residents, numbers from 1999 data show that the population increased from 87,000 to approximately 157,000; a number that does not include the additional large dose of daily visitors.

Since boating is a popular recreational activity among Keys residents and visitors, an increase in the number of people means an increase in the number of boaters, and the potential for greater impacts to marine resources rises.

The shallow waters of Florida Bay can pose a particular challenge to even the most experienced boaters. According to a recent aerial survey of the 1.5 million acres of seagrass in the area, over 30,000 acres are damaged from propeller scars. Once damaged, seagrass beds may not recover, leaving barren areas where fish, lobsters and a variety of other animals once flourished.

Seagrasses are damaged when props gouge the bottom, tearing through root systems and digging up plants. A single engine vessel can leave a long trail of mud and uprooted seagrass when attempting to power through a shallow area.

To minimize impacts, boaters need to have knowledge of the waters in which they are operating. Local, professional guides not only have many years of experience, but can also provide helpful advice to make your trip more enjoyable.

Everglades National Park rangers emphasize the importance of slightly raising the boat's engine before taking off in shallow water. With the propeller pointed up and away from the bay bottom, you will minimize the impact of propeller wash on the bottom as the

boat steadily comes up on plane. The engine can be trimmed back down as the boat slowly rises out of the water.

Many boaters do not realize that seagrass beds can be growing within inches of the water's surface whether they are located close to shore or a few miles off shore. Vessel operators should be aware of water depths at all times and should carry and use a navigational chart of the area. These charts have marked channels and depth readings. The safest route is to always stay within marked channels.

Keep track of the tides. Even at high tides some grass beds are vulnerable.

Learn to read the water. Remember the rhyme, "Blue, blue, cruise on through; White, white, you just might; Green, green, nice and clean; Brown, brown run aground." Shallow water appears dark or brown in color while deeper water appears blue or green. Sand covered areas appear white and can be deceptively shallow. Although the sun's angle can make this a challenge, polarized sunglasses are very helpful in distinguishing water colors.

If you do run into a seagrass flat, you will leave a mud trail behind your boat where the prop has churned up the bottom, clouded the water and probably cut seagrass roots. Stop immediately, tilt your engine up and drift, pole or walk your boat off the flat.

One of the most important aspects of boating is to have a plan of action that includes studying charts, reading the waters and knowing your depth and draft. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Enjoy your time on the water, and take responsibility to take care of the bay.

For more information contact the Florida Bay Education Project at 305-852-3592. Additional information on a variety of topics is available from the University of Florida/Monroe County Cooperative Extension Service, 5100 College Road, Stock Island or call at 292-4501; fax = 292-4415; email monroe@mail.ifas.ufl.edu or visit our web site <http://monroe.ifas.ufl.edu>. Our services are free and available to all without regard to race, color, sex, or national origin. #####