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Tallying Up the Costs of Seagrass Damage

It's been a perfect day. You got your limit on lobster, the weather was sunny and calm, your secret spot delivered again, without any intrusion from other boaters. But you stayed a little longer than expected and now the sun is quite low in the sky. The familiar waters that you easily navigated on the way out are now difficult to read. To make matters worse, the tide is out. "Hmmm" you wonder, "somewhere up ahead there's a flat that seemingly rises out of nowhere. Now, where's that marker post?"

This scenario, while hauntingly familiar to many boaters in the Keys, is only one of the many ways in which we cause significant destruction to the flats and the seagrass communities that live there. Too often, unsuspecting or careless boaters will cut swaths called propeller (prop) scars or blow holes into the productive miniature jungles of the grass flats, damaging this critical habitat and disrupting the lives of the creatures who depend on it.

Monroe County Mayor Shirley Freeman has declared March "Seagrass Awareness Month." Throughout the month, there has been a lot of publicity about the important role seagrass communities play in our dynamic ecosystem. This month also saw the kick-off of a new program by the Florida Keys Fishing Guides Association. The guides, realizing the importance of seagrass to their appreciation of the underwater world and their way of life, are volunteering to pass out information to boaters at ramps and on the water. Marina managers, towboat operations, and boat rental sites also have expressed interest in getting the word out. Scientists and resource managers, in addition to trying to increase awareness, are experimenting with methods for restoring damaged grass beds faster than the anticipated five to ten years. Success is being found with bird guano, of all things.

Unfortunately, though, Seagrass Awareness Month isn't just about all the good that folks are trying to do to teach boaters about saving our seagrass. There is a lesson of seagrass damage that isn't pretty, and that's the costs associated with damage. Most costs relate directly to the severity of damage. First, there are the environmental costs: lost habitat, dead grass and fragmented beds where critters won't cross, fish don't swim, and birds can't forage. Seagrass flats support our multi-million dollar fisheries, help filter the water, and

stabilize bottom sediments. The costs in terms of total habitat loss due to chronic damage are incalculable.

Second are personal property costs. Damage to vessels, hulls, and propellers often occur when a grass bed is damaged. Towing fees charged by companies that assist grounded vessels are roughly \$125 per hour (dock to dock) during the day and \$150 per hour at night. The fee for floating a grounded vessel is \$5 - \$10 per foot of the vessel.

Last, but definitely not least, vessel groundings and prop-scarring that result in damage to seagrass habitats are illegal. Damage is subject to both federal and state fines and penalties, including civil penalties and costs for damage assessment, restoration and monitoring. In the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, damaging seagrass carries a fine of \$100 for the first square yard and \$75 for each additional square yard up to ten. In larger cases, attorneys determine penalties. Many insurers will not cover fines resulting from groundings and prop-scarring.

Watching your tides, studying your charts, knowing the waters, and staying in deep channels will help eliminate needless seagrass destruction. Paying attention to saving the grass flats is important for everyone. And paying attention is better than paying for damage.

If you'd like more information on seagrass or Seagrass Awareness Month activities, please contact Susan White at 305-872-2239.

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