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Monroe County Observes Seagrass Awareness Month

Key West -- Monroe County Mayor Shirley Freeman has declared March "Seagrass Awareness Month," to focus attention on the importance of seagrass habitat, and ways residents and visitors can help protect it.

"Healthy seagrass beds mean a healthy economy for Monroe County," said Susan White, marine resources manager for the Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges and chair of the Seagrass Outreach Partnership. "The marine life that forms the basis of our commercial fishing industry and draws millions of visitors to the Florida Keys each year to fish, snorkel and dive depends on seagrass habitat."

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. Improving boating skills is an easy way for individuals to help protect seagrass habitat.

In South Florida, scars from boat propellers have damaged 30,000 acres of seagrass, according to a 1995 report by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. These scars may take ten years or more to heal; some scars may never heal. Learning to

identify shallow water, using charts and other navigational aids and operating only in more than three feet of water are several ways boaters can avoid damaging seagrass.

"Boating in our shallow waters is tricky at best, and calls for added caution. The grassy flats are easily destroyed by unknowing or careless boaters, and our seagrasses are too essential to our ecosystem to allow this destruction to continue," said White. "As boaters, when we get behind the helm of a boat, we must operate that vessel responsibly. Our coral reef ecosystem depends upon it."

This year's Seagrass Awareness Month marks the start of an important new partnership. The Florida Keys Guides Association has joined the Seagrass Outreach Partnership and will launch the Seagrass Awareness Team (SAT). Modeled after the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary's successful Team OCEAN program, which educates boaters at the coral reef, SAT will bring seagrass education to boaters in Florida Bay.

"We are excited about our involvement with the partnership," said Capt. Mike Ehlers, president of the Florida Keys Fishing Guides Association. "This project gives us an on-going opportunity to highlight the importance of protecting seagrass. That lush green carpet so abundantly full of life - It gives us so much and requires nothing in return except that we not destroy it."

During Seagrass Awareness Month, all-new episodes of the television program Waterways will investigate the threat boat groundings pose to seagrass in Biscayne National Park and profile an innovative project to restore propeller scars in the grass beds of Lignumvitae Key State Botanical Site in the Upper Keys. Other episodes will provide tips for safely operating vessels in shallow water. The show airs Mondays and Friday at 7:30 p.m. on AT&T channel five.

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Photo Captions:

- 1) Capt. Mike Ehlers, president of the Florida Keys Fishing Guides Association, accepts a county proclamation declaring March "Seagrass Awareness Month" on behalf of the Seagrass Outreach Partnership.
- 2) Healthy seagrass beds provide foraging and nursery habitat for fish and other creatures and help keep Florida Keys waters clear by stabilizing sediments and absorbing nutrients.