



Seagrass Awareness Month Public Service Announcements

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The shallow waters of the Florida Keys can be a challenge to even the most experienced boaters. According to a recent survey, of the 1.5 million acres in our area, over 30,000 scarred from boat propellers. These scars may take up to 7 years to fully heal. In places where scarring is severe and repeated, regrowth may never take place. Losing our seagrass to boating impacts means more than losing a few blades of grass. It means losing valuable habitat that supports a variety of important animals including pink shrimp and host of fish. Remember, when boating in the Keys, please be aware and boat with care.

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Monroe County has an economic and ecological interest in protecting the nearly 1.5 million acres of seagrass found in the shallow waters of the Florida Keys. Seagrass communities support a vast array of marine life including recreational and commercial fish and shellfish. It is the responsibility of all boaters to prevent destruction of our precious seagrass resource by boating responsibly at all times. Even at high tide some grassbeds are vulnerable to damage from propellers and hulls. If you find yourself in water too shallow, you should immediately stop! Turn your motor off! Trim your motor up to prevent further damage. Wait for high tide and carefully walk your vessel out to deeper water. You may contact the Coast Guard on VHF radio channel 16 or the Florida Marine Patrol at 1-800-DIAL-FMP. Remember, *FMP is a free call on a cell phone.

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March 2000 has been declared Seagrass Awareness Month by Monroe County Mayor Freeman. The month-long dedication was proclaimed because seagrasses in our local waters are unnecessarily being destroyed by boat propeller damage and boat groundings. In Monroe County alone, there are over 30,000 acres of damaged grassbeds. This represents the loss of valuable habitat for pink shrimp, spiny lobsters, and many recreational and commercial fish species. Boaters should be aware and use care especially when boating in shallow waters. If you would like to find out more about protecting our seagrass communities, contact your local Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary office at 852-7717 ext. 30.

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Next time you're out in the shallow waters of the Florida Keys and backcountry, boat carefully to protect the many creatures that seek shelter and food in the seagrass flats.

Shrimp, crabs, urchins, snapper, snook, and a host of other fish are some of the more common inhabitants who may be affected by the loss of seagrass habitat created by boater impacts. Great blue herons, great egrets, and other birds also depend upon healthy seagrasses and routinely feed on the grass-covered flats exposed during low tide. Destruction of seagrasses with boat propellers and running aground can be prevented if you take the time to care. When you are boating, know the features of your local waters, use up-to-date nautical charts, use marked channels, and slow down when in doubt about the depth of the water to avoid running aground or creating prop scar damage. Please, be aware and boat with care.

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The largest seagrass meadow in the world is found right here in the Florida Keys and south Florida. This underwater habitat supports a thriving recreational bonefish and tarpon flats fishing industry and a commercial pink shrimp fishery estimated at 13 million dollars per year. The loss of seagrass habitat as a result of less-than-careful boaters may have direct impacts on fish populations. In some cases, fines or penalties may be levied against the boat operator for damaging the natural resource. By familiarizing yourself with local waters where you plan to boat, staying in deep water and in marked channels, wearing polarized lenses to read the water, and using up-to-date nautical charts; you can reduce your chances of damaging the seagrass community with your boat and hull. Please be aware and boat with care.