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**Renowned Oceans Advocate Helps Ring In
Seagrass Awareness Month**

Islamorada World-renowned ocean explorer, environmentalist and film-producer Jean-Michel Cousteau joins the local Seagrass Outreach Partnership in launching Seagrass Awareness Month at a special celebration at Worldwide Sportsman in Islamorada on Saturday, March 2nd.

” The health of the beloved coral reefs of the Florida Keys depends upon the health of its seagrass habitat,” said Cousteau, President of the Ocean Futures Society. “Without the quiet beauty of the seagrass meadows, the splendors of the coral reef could not thrive. Like everything on our planet, the two are directly connected”

Florida Governor Jeb Bush has again declared March Seagrass Awareness Month statewide. “Awareness of the problems facing this vital natural resource will help to create an understanding of the ways seagrass damage can impact both the economic and ecological value of our marine resources,” states the governor’s proclamation.

March 2002 marks the fourth annual Seagrass Awareness Month in Monroe County, and this year, municipalities such as Key West, Marathon and Islamorada are joining the county in recognizing the importance of seagrass habitat to the environment and economy of the Florida Keys.

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The Seagrass Festival will run from 10 am to 3 pm on the back porch and lawn of Worldwide Sportsman, located at mile marker 81.5 Overseas Highway, bayside. A variety of booths will offer fun activities for children, including button-making, word puzzles, fly-tying lessons from members of the Florida Keys Guides Association and a touch tank. Adults can learn how biologists assess damage from boat groundings and practice their navigation skills on paper courses. Everyone attending can enter a free raffle for great prizes, including snorkel and glass-bottom boat trips, and canoe and kayak rentals. A drawing will be made every hour, and winners must be present.

Major threats to seagrass include coastal development, dredge and fill projects and deteriorating water quality. In the Florida Keys, direct impacts from improper vessel operation represent a significant threat to seagrass habitat that can be easily eliminated. According to a 1995 study by the Florida Marine Research Institute, approximately 30,000 acres of seagrass in Monroe County bear propeller scars, more than any other county in the state. For more information on seagrass, visit the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary web site at <http://www.fknms.nos.noaa.gov>.

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