

ECOWATCH



National Estuaries Week – a look at their importance

■ BY DELORES SAVAS

“Estuaries are the breadbasket of the oceans. Many species either spawn in the estuaries or their offspring use these habitats as nurseries for their first summer season of growth.”

*Chris Chambers
Research Fisheries Biologist*



In order to bring attention to the importance of estuaries, a special week has been set aside by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)’s Office of Coastal Management to inform the people on the extreme value of estuaries.

National Estuary Week has been observed from September 17 through the 24th each year in celebration of these extraordinary ecosystems, the benefits estuaries provide and the need to protect them.

On September 9th EcoWatch featured the column “A Requiem for the Man in the Hole,” telling of one man’s fight for the Brazilian rainforest and the loss of millions of trees that were cut down every day.

While estuaries do not have vast rainforest, they do contain mangroves that also clean our air and many times are referred to as mangrove forest, critical to the health of estuaries. So far Tampa Bay has lost 50 percent of its mangroves, and farther south, the mangroves of Charlotte Harbor estuaries have declined by nearly 60 percent.

One could say Florida has its own mini-rainforest decline, due to the destruction of many estuaries in Florida. Scientific research data on the historical and current wetlands in 55 of the large estuaries show that these estuaries have lost 85 percent of their original vegetated wetlands. These 55 estuaries represent about 97 percent of the area of historical estuaries on the West coast. These losses reflect almost all of the estuary losses.

The decline of estuaries has been

due to large-scale conversion by draining, filling, damming or dredging.

Estuaries are vital to many areas.

They can be observed in a partly enclosed coastal water body where freshwater from rivers and streams mixes with saltwater from the ocean. They are places of transition from land to sea. Estuaries protect Florida by absorbing the force of storms and providing an outlet for floodwaters from the land.

Estuaries are also some of the most biologically productive systems on earth. About 80 to 90 percent of Florida’s commercially valuable fish and shellfish species depend on estuaries during at least part of their lives.

Mangroves are their sentinels.

From Daytona Beach southward on the Atlantic Coast and from the Tampa Bay area southwest on the Gulf Coast, mangrove forests serve as nature’s protection of estuaries. These special trees that can thrive in or near saltwater once formed a barricade around southern Florida’s estuaries. Unfortunately, the pace of urban development and other activities has caused many problems for these fascinating trees.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has listed some facts about Florida’s estuaries:

- Estuaries have many different

types of habitats vital to many important species of plants, fish and other wildlife. Habitat – one could say “home” – includes shellfish beds, seagrass meadows, saltwater and freshwater marshes, forested wetlands, beaches, river deltas and rocky shores.

- Estuaries and coastal waters provide essential habitat for over 75 percent of the commercial fish catch and 80 to 90 percent of recreational catch of fish.

- Fishing, tourism and recreational boating – all of which depend on healthy and productive estuaries – provide more than 28 million jobs for our nation. Commercial and sport fishing alone contribute \$111 billion yearly to the nation’s economy.

- There’s a lot we don’t know yet about estuaries. Like exactly how many acres of estuary habitats have been and continue to be destroyed. We do know that the level of habitat loss in some of our nation’s most important estuaries is approaching 80 to 90 percent.

According to a Florida Sea Grant publication written by Jay Humphrey, Shelley Franz and Bill Seaman, “Despite all the good things they do, Florida’s estuaries are being damaged by the Sunshine State’s rapid pace of

urbanization, dredging, construction projects, new highways and many other activities that have combined to cause serious concerns, as well as disagreements about the future health of the estuaries. Although there may be a lack of agreement about the consequences of our behavior toward the estuaries, everyone agrees that estuaries are deserving of our concern and protection.”

Some of the actions you can take to save and protect our estuaries are:

- Plant native trees or seagrass and remove invasive vegetation.
- Don’t litter streets and storm drains that empty into rivers and streams and enter into our estuaries. Pick up your waste.
- Do not dump petroleum products, including oil, down drains, and recycle used motor oil.
- Keep your use of fertilizer to a minimum and delay application of fertilizer if there is a forecast of rain later in the day.
- Inspect your septic system to ensure that it is still working properly. In addition to releasing harmful bacteria and other pathogens into waterways, leaks in septic systems contribute to nutrient pollution.

It should be noted that our coastal regions are home to over half of the population of the United States. Of the 32 largest cities in the world, 22 are located on estuaries.

As you can see, estuaries need our help to survive. There are many ways to pick from. Please think about it. Don’t take our estuaries for granted.

SOURCES

Importance of Florida’s Estuaries – A Citizen’s Guide to Total Living and Conservation
Florida Sea Grant Publications
USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service
NOAA National Estuary Week
email: gaiasvigil@gmail.com

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