

COASTAL SEAGRASSES: The House Made of Straw

70% of Florida's fisheries rely on seagrass beds for at least part of their lives

by Justin Sapp

In a world filled with grassy fields and landscaped yards, you wouldn't be blamed for thinking that seagrasses were just another insignificant resident of Florida's fish-filled waters. But seagrasses are much more than the "lawn of the sea." They are the foundation and lifeblood of productive fisheries.

Seagrass meadows serve up a buffet of food to our trout, redfish, flounder, mackerels, numerous species of baitfish and a wide variety of crabs and shellfish. The gag grouper is just one example of an important game fish that depends on the food and protection offered by healthy coastal seagrass meadows to ensure its survival in the first year of life. Seagrass beds are more diverse than any other underwater ecosystem—more than even mangroves or coral reefs. Manatees and sea turtles feed on the grass. Dolphins and wading birds forage through these underwater plants. Seagrasses are an important food source for many species of ducks and other migratory waterfowl. But seagrasses are also very important to us.

Last year, seagrass communities

throughout the state supported a commercial fish and shellfish industry worth over 1.1 billion and employing nearly 13,000 people. The economic impact of recreational saltwater fishing in Florida is over 5.5 billion, while the state's boating industry is worth nearly 16 billion. These numbers don't even include the amount of money spent by residents and visitors who come to our coast for general recreation and nature tourism. But the critical role of seagrass doesn't end there.

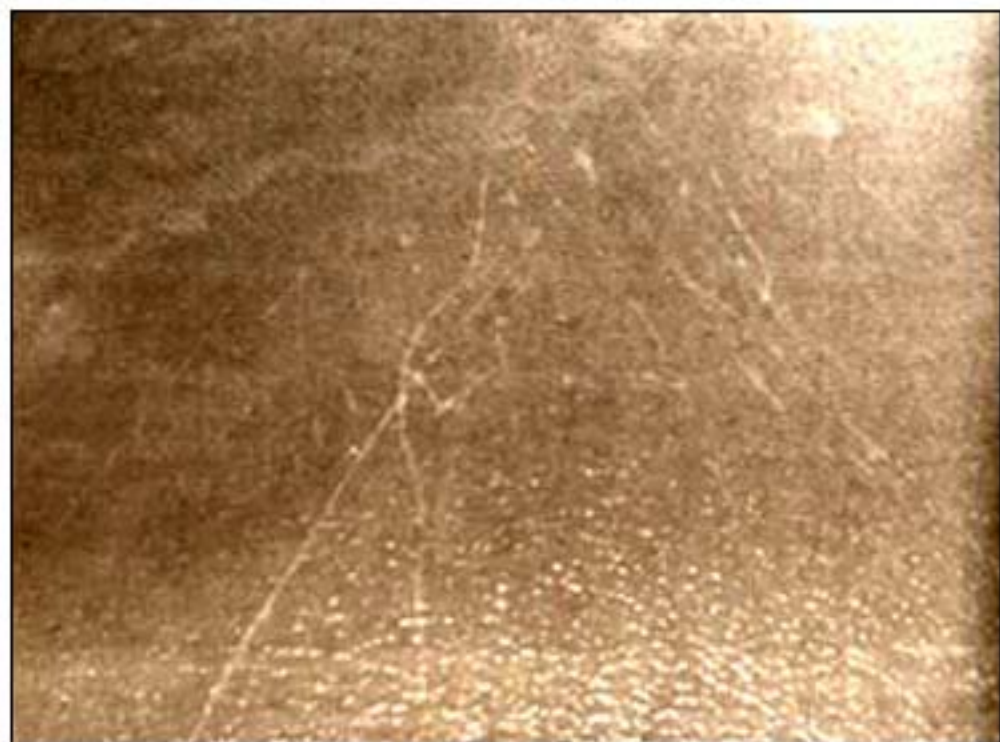
Seagrasses, the flowering underwater grasses found in estuaries, lagoons and shallow, open shelves off Florida's coast, not only provide a nursery ground for marine life, but also maintain water quality and clarity by stabilizing bottom sediments and filtering nutrients from stormwater run-off.

Scientists designate the seven different varieties of seagrass found throughout the state as "Essential Fish Habitat." Basically, this means that the more healthy seagrass we have along our coast, the more fish we have to catch. Since the turn of the century, Florida has lost over half of its seagrass beds

due to development, dredging, pollution and increased boating activity. Since the late 1800s, approximately 80 percent of the seagrass coverage in Tampa Bay has been lost mainly due to human activities. Through a lot of money and hard work, this trend is slowing as citizens and

leaders begin to realize the direct link between healthy seagrass and the local populations of snook, trout, and shrimp. Millions of dollars are used for programs that attempt to reestablish sea grass in affected areas. Efforts have been made

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SCARRING OF SEAGRASS BEDS caused by boat props is readily apparent in aerial photographs.