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LONGBOAT KEY

THURSDAY, JAN. 13, 2022 1 week ago

Environmental concerns continue for Sarasota Bay, expert says





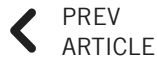
Tomasko discussed the health of Sarasota Bay, what local leaders should consider in 2022 and the effects of losing about 2,000 acres of seagrass.

by: **Mark Bergin** | Staff Writer

Maintaining a healthy Sarasota Bay is vital for the area's quality of life and local economy.

Longboat Key's proximity to the bay connects the water's health to many facets of island life and business.

The Observer caught up with Sarasota Bay Estuary Program Executive Director David



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ko to discuss the environmental health of sarasota Bay, the effects of losing about 2,000 acres of seagrass and what people can do to help the water quality.



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we really have to be kind of like specific to different regions.

Sarasota Bay Estuary Program executive director David Tomasko sends regular updates to Longboat Key leaders about the environmental health of Sarasota Bay. Photo provided by David Tomasko.





the lower two-thirds of the bay, and that's kind of unfortunate. So we need to find out what we need to act upon.

Then we have Roberts Bay. In that region, we're actually seeing signs of improvement that seems to be associated with recent things that have been done in Sarasota County to act upon what have been problems for the last couple of years. And that is, for about five years, we had overflows of wastewater that were miles away from the bay, but nonetheless looked like they brought about an adverse impact to the bay. And those overflows of wastewater — and it wasn't raw wastewater, it was treated wastewater — but it had a lot of nitrogen in it. Those overflows aren't really occurring anymore.



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e they've acted upon it and because they're planning on upgrading that wastewater treatment plant with nutrient removal technology, we think that the problem has been solved. And if they actually move forward as quickly as they're planning on upgrading the wastewater, we don't think we're going to have that problem again.

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didn't cause a lot of flooding, but it made the bay very turbid.

We had red tide, hurricane-induced muddy water and then we had another red tide. (It) set us back a lot in terms of it caused, we believe, about 2,000 acres of seagrass to die because (it was) just too dark for too long





Is there an area of Sarasota Bay that is most concerning to you?

I would say the upper part of the bay. The water quality is back, but we lost 2,000 acres of seagrass, and we want to get it back, and we don't want it to take too long. ... We need to start figuring out whether or not we need to do something other than what we've done in the past.

And what I mean is, a lot of people think: "Oh, the Indian River Lagoon and all those manatees starved to death. Well, let's plant seagrass." Well, they're starving to death because the seagrass has died because the water quality sucks. If you plant seagrass, it'll just die again. That's not the case in the upper part of Sarasota

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it we've never had to plant seagrass to gain seagrass. We've just acted on our water quality, so if you're doing enough and the water quality stays good, it might come back by itself, but we may want to jumpstart it with doing some transplanting in that area.

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What does it mean to say about 2,000 acres of seagrass is lost?

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the bay with seagrass than right next to it in an area with no seagrass at all. ... It's also a big drop in the food supply for manatees.





There (were) a couple steps, and we've done some of them already. ... When we talk acres of seagrass, it's from mapping efforts done by the Southwest Florida Water Management every two years from a plane that's flying at like 9,000 feet. ...

(The 2,000 acres of lost sea grass) is not completely gone, but it's gone or it's very, very thin. So that's the first thing. It is a real loss.

The second thing that we've done is we've actually worked with some of the state agencies to go out and look for a seed bank. In other words, if we get the water quality right, will they come back on their own? And, we found a viable seed bank at about 15% of the sites, so the vast majority of the areas where we lost seagrass, it's still not there and (there are) no seeds for it to come from.

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So the next thing that we need to do is, if we take the seagrass and put it down in like eight feet of water where we have this loss, is it going to grow? And if it doesn't, then you just stop. Then, apparently, it's not good enough water quality. But if it does grow, then we have to come back and say, "Alright, what are we going to

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What would you urge local leaders to consider or act upon this year?





and swim across the bay where that pipeline is, the bottom above the pipeline has sunk down roughly about 2 feet deeper than the surrounding areas...

One of the things that we think can help is as Longboat Key moves forward with replacing that sewer line. ... We hope that (there are) opportunities to raise the bottom of the bay in the area where it's kind of ... down 2 feet or so. ...

Sarasota County is going to be spending a massive amount of money on wastewater treatment plant upgrades. And when they do that, and some of the wastewater treatment plans will happen very quickly, like within the next three years it looks like, as that happens, we should dramatically reduce the possibility of



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wastewater issues in the bay.

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What can the average person do?

Pick up after your pets, watch that you don't over-fertilize, don't blow your grass clippings out into the water or don't blow them into a storm drain. These are things can absolutely do to help improve the water quality

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Mark Bergin is the Longboat Key Town Hall reporter for the Observer. He has previously worked as a senior digital producer at WTSP, the CBS affiliate in St. Petersburg. Mark is a graduate of the University of Missouri and grew up in the Chicagoland area.

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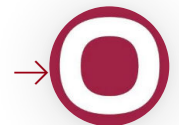
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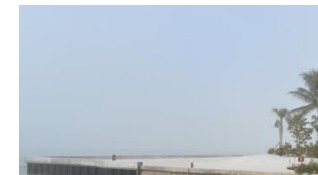
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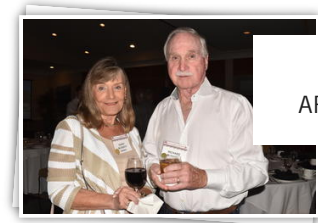
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Yes, we need seagrass. Yes, we need clean waters. Yes we need to change our habits so the bay is capable of livin_ healthily with us. Beyond planting seagrass, in order to clean the bay we need to stop using plastic straws, tableware, cups, bottles, containers, etc. We need to be able to have industrial composting, true recycling, and we need to stop using poisons like Roundup to make our lawns look nice. We probably shouldn't even have grass lawns-that symbol of British upper class. Until we start thinking about and enacting these things, the Bay will never survive.

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