

LOCAL

‘Piece of Old Florida.’ How Cortez fishing fest helps protect rare undeveloped coastline

BY RYAN BALLOGG

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The 2022 Cortez Commercial Fishing Festival will bring a weekend of food and fun and raise funds for a community nature preserve. BY [TIFFANY TOMPKINS](#)



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CORTEZ

People who visit the 40th annual Cortez Commercial Fishing Festival this weekend won't just be celebrating seafood. They'll be helping to preserve its future, organizers say.

Proceeds from the event, which features food, live music, art and craft vendors and science talks, benefit the FISH Preserve. The 95-acre waterfront nature parcel is owned by a community-grown nonprofit, the Florida Institute for Saltwater Heritage.

It is one of the last bits of undeveloped coastline along Sarasota Bay.

"There's so much development that's going on, so being able to have this piece of Old Florida that's protected in perpetuity is a huge deal," said Angela Collins, Florida Sea Grant and UF/IFAS Extension agent with Manatee County.

Though compact compared to some local parks, the preserve is home to diverse wildlife and important mangrove habitat. And FISH members hope to entice even more native plants and animals as restoration efforts continue.

WHAT'S HAPPENING AT FISH PRESERVE?

Earth moving equipment spotted at the preserve has led some locals to worry that there is construction or development underway on the land, FISH Board member John Stevely, a retired Florida Sea Grant scientist, told the Herald.

But it is actually part of the land restoration process.

Current efforts are focused on restoring the preserve, which was once used as a construction dump site, to a healthier state. Equipment has been used to remove swaths of invasive plants, and natives are being installed in their place. And land-moving efforts are restructuring the preserve's waterways for ideal tidal flow.

And eventually, the public will be able to enjoy the preserve, too. Work has begun on a nature trail that will wind through the land and offer a glimpse of Old Florida on Sarasota Bay. And pedestrian bridges will span the preserve's waterways for a bird's eye view of the marine sanctuary.

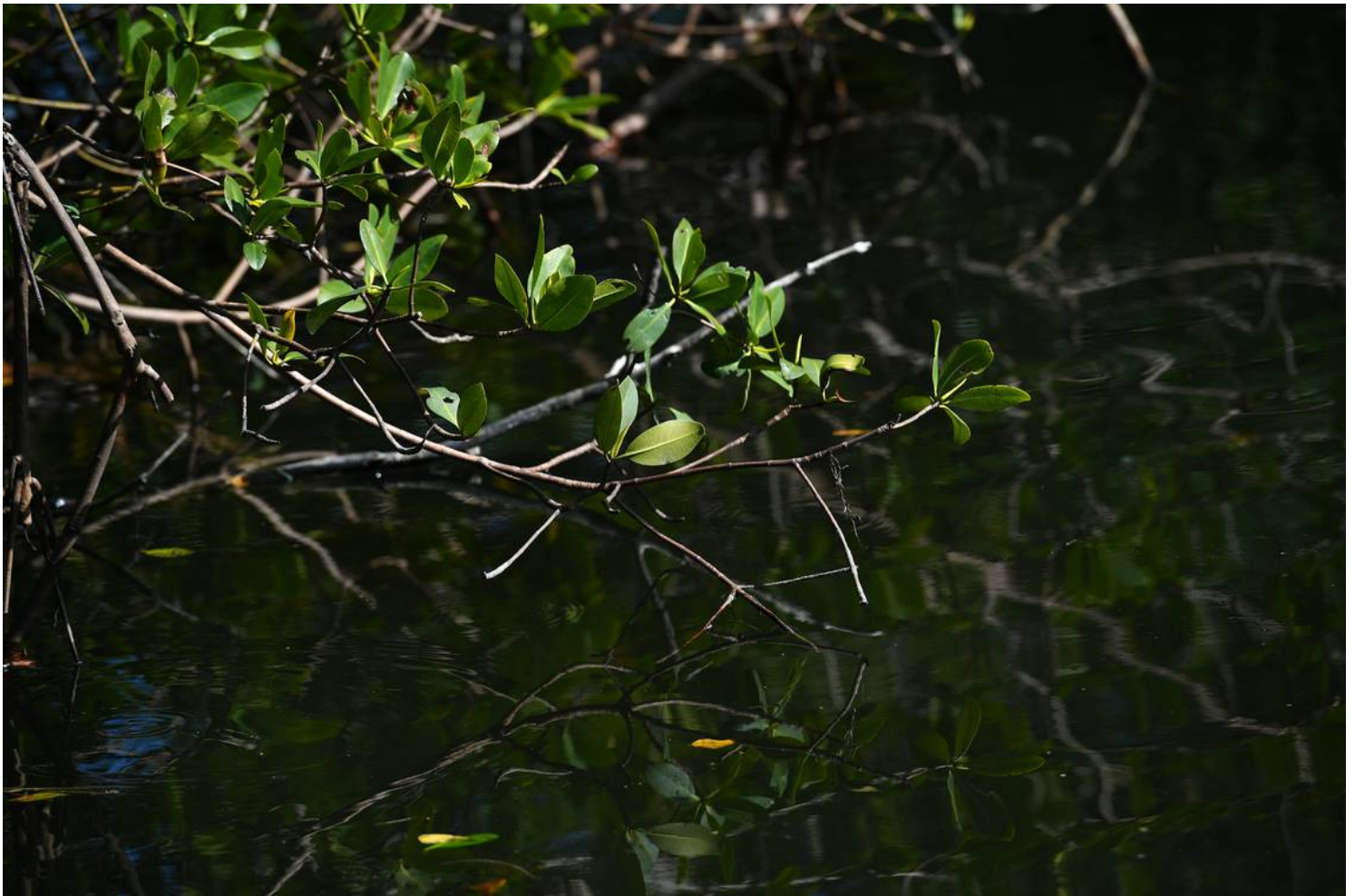
Sarasota Bay Estuary Program, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and Manatee County Government have partnered with FISH volunteers working to restore the land.

Collins estimates that the restoration process is about two-thirds complete. And the work doesn't end there.

“You restore it, but you still have to maintain it. Even when it's complete, it will still require funding and maintenance and volunteer power,” Collins said.

Each year, the Cortez Commercial Fishing Festival raises funds that go directly into the preservation project.

And with last year's event canceled because of the COVID-19 pandemic, organizers are hoping to make up for the shortfall.



The 2022 Cortez Commercial Fishing Festival will bring a weekend of food and fun and raise funds for a community nature preserve. Tiffany Tompkins TTOMPKINS@BRADENTON.COM

PRESERVING MARINE HABITAT

All [three varieties of mangrove](#) native to Florida — black, white and red— can be found in the preserve. They fringe and shelter pools of saltwater that are perfect retreats for many varieties of fish.

Take for instance, mullet, which favor inshore areas like mangrove forests for much of their lives.

Smoked or fried mullet is known as a favorite Old Florida delicacy, but the fish's significance as a food source far precedes fish fries or restaurant menus.

The pre-settler, Indigenous Calusa population used woven nets to harvest the food source along the Gulf Coast of Florida, historians have recorded. The practice was next adapted by Cuban fisherman in the 1700s, who traveled [all the way to Southwest Florida](#) for the area's bounty of inshore fishing.

Later, the North Carolina anglers who settled in the area of Cortez, then known as Hunter's Point, followed suit with their own handmade nets. The skill eventually helped the village survive the Great Depression without federal aid, and the reliable source of food-inspired a nickname for the area of Sarasota Bay: "The Kitchen."

Today, mullet is the [most harvested fish in Florida](#) by the pound, according to the Florida Department of Agriculture, with Manatee County among the largest contributors to the haul.

But in order to sustain populations of wild fish, and the industries and cultures that are tied to them, nature needs a place to do its thing. And those have rapidly disappeared over the past decades as development eats up Florida's remaining green spaces.

Mullet are just one of the fish varieties that now find a haven in the sheltered waters of the FISH Preserve in Cortez. Other fish, such as snook and grouper, make use of the mangroves as a nursery during juvenile stages.

"It provides critical habitat for a lot of the fishes that we depend upon for our commercial and our recreational fisheries," Collins said.

And with the abundance of fish come wading and fishing birds to eat them.

Other residents of the preserve include crabs and shellfish, including the variety of hard-shell clam commonly farmed in Tampa Bay.



A bounty of crispy fried fish was served at the 2019 Cortez Commercial Fishing Festival. Ryan Ballogg

CORTEZ COMMERCIAL FISHING FESTIVAL: WHAT TO KNOW

The Cortez Commercial Fishing Festival packs two days with food and fun in the heart of the historic fishing village.

Over 50 vendors selling arts and crafts, including many nautical-themed pieces, will be on deck.

The festival also features all-day live music performances, and dancing is encouraged.

Seafood is another big draw, with vendors offering grouper, crab, shrimp, crawfish, oysters, jambalaya and more. Other food offerings, as well as beer, drinks, snacks and dessert, will also be on hand.

And there's also a chance to learn more about the natural marine environment and fishing industry that make Florida and Cortez so special.

During educational "Dock Talks," marine scientists share insights about the life cycles, habits and habitats of popular seafood fish.

And kids have a chance to see some of them up close with a touch tank experience.

Festival goers can also stop by the Florida Maritime Museum and the Cortez Cultural Center, both free to enter, and learn more about the historic coastal community.

Offsite parking for the festival will be available at G.T. Bay Park, 5502 33rd Ave. Dr. W., Bradenton, and at Coquina Beach, with shuttle buses to take guests back and forth to the festival (\$3). Parking will also be available directly to the east of the festival (\$5).

- Details: 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Feb. 19 and 20. 4415 119th St. W., Cortez. Ages 13 and up: \$5. Ages 12 and under: Free.
- Info: cortez-fish.org/fishing-festival.html



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Ryan Ballogg is a news reporter and features writer at the Bradenton Herald. Since joining the paper in 2018, he has received awards for features, art and environmental writing in the Florida Press Club's Excellence in Journalism Competition. Ryan is a Florida native and graduated from University of South Florida St. Petersburg.

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BY RYAN CALLIHAN

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