

Reel Time: Celebrate the bay

By **Rusty Chinnis** - September 12, 2022



The Sister Keys are the largest group of undeveloped islands in Sarasota Bay, deemed an estuary of national significance in 1989. - Rusty Chinnis | Sun

The communities that line Sarasota Bay are fortunate to have an active National Estuary Program centered right here in Manatee and Sarasota counties.

First named in the newly-minted Water Quality Act of 1987, the Sarasota Bay National Estuary Program (SBEP) officially began in June 1989 as one of 28 estuaries in the United States that were named by the U.S. Congress as "estuaries of national significance."

The SBEP is celebrating National Estuaries Week 2022 from Sept. 17-24. During the month of September, the public is welcome and encouraged to attend various events and opportunities to experience and learn more about the area's critical local bays and waterways!

[National Estuaries Week](#) is celebrated every year to showcase the value of bays and estuaries in providing for local communities. An estuary is defined as an area where freshwater and saltwater meet. On the Gulf coast of Florida, estuaries provide habitat for over 70% of key recreational and commercial fish species including snook, redfish, snapper, grouper and mullet. Estuaries also support a host of birds, dolphins and manatees. They are the main driver of the local economy, elevating property values and underpinning local economies. Habitats like mangroves and seagrasses help reduce erosion and storm damage, and add to the overall quality of life here in Florida.

Here are a few of the activities the public can enjoy as they experience and learn about the Sarasota Bay Estuary.

Join SBEP and Oscar Scherer State Park on Wednesday, Sept. 14 from 5:30-7:30 p.m. Enjoy a free guided hike to Big Lake and learn about the efforts that go into protecting, restoring, creating and maintaining habitat for water quality and wildlife.

Check out Vertical Oyster Gardens (VOGs) on Tuesday, Sept. 20 from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at Bayfront Park in Sarasota. VOGs are oyster shells strung with lengths of rope that hang below docks. VOGs help add more habitat to our bays for sessile organisms – oysters, sea squirts and other marine organisms that grow attached to surfaces.

These VOGs have become more important as most shorelines in the greater Sarasota Bay area are “armored,” meaning that they have been engineered with seawalls, bulkheads, and riprap. This armoring reduces the habitat that is available for marine life. While oysters might settle on older concrete seawalls and wooden pilings, vinyl and other newer construction materials and coatings can prevent oysters and other sessile organisms from settling. These materials might extend the life of the seawall, but they severely reduce the amount of habitat available to oysters.

You have the opportunity at this event to learn about and build your own VOGs. Efforts by citizens help create habitat and contribute to our understanding of oyster distribution in Sarasota and Tampa bays.

These are just a few of the opportunities. For a full list and to sign up, visit the [Sarasota Bay National Estuaries Week page](#).

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