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LOCAL

## After 23 years, vision to save piece of Cortez from new development becomes a reality

BY RYAN BALLOGG

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Cortez Fish Preserve protects a piece of natural Florida



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The 2022 Cortez Commercial Fishing Festival raises funds for the Fish Preserve  
BY TIFFANY TOMPKINS



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BRADENTON

A decades-long effort to preserve and restore a rare piece of undeveloped coastline in Manatee County is complete.



Revamped county building to provide transitional family housing

Known as FISH Preserve, the roughly 100-acre swath of green hugs Sarasota Bay, where it provides a haven for fish, birds and mangrove habitat.

It also borders the historic fishing village of Cortez — one of the last working fishing villages in Florida.

It didn't happen by accident.

TOP VIDEOS

Three decades ago, residents of Cortez saw that Southwest Florida's landscape was quickly changing as coastal development closed in all around.

In 1991, they formed the Florida Institute for Saltwater Heritage (FISH). The nonprofit alliance between local historians and anglers aimed to preserve the "character and heritage of Florida's traditional waterfront communities."

Its other major goal: to preserve "the natural environment that has nurtured people in fishing communities for thousands of years."

"This is a [very tiny slice of Old Florida](#) that we don't want to lose," FISH board member and former Manatee County Commissioner Jane von Hahmann said.

**COMMUNITY EFFORT SAVES LAND FROM DEVELOPMENT**

Fast forward to 2000, when the group got the chance to make an of piece of land that was up for sale at the eastern edge of Cortez villa

A community fundraising effort covered an initial \$60,000 mortgag property. Funds continued to flow every year from the [Cortez Com Festival](#), an annual event promoting seafood and science education was paid off in 2005.

01:03 01:30

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Additional land buys brought the preserve to a little over 100 acres, and FISH hatched a plan to restore it in several phases.



The restoration efforts have sought to heal land that was scarred from use as a dump site and other negative human impacts.

FISH formed partnerships with local, state and national agencies that helped along the way, and won a major wetlands restoration grant from [the Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership](#).

Invasive species were removed. Natives were planted. Tidal flow was restored.

The restoration plan is now complete, and FISH board members are looking ahead to the preserve’s next chapter.



A community conservation project in the fishing village of Cortez, Florida protects 100 acres of mangrove and wildlife habitat from development. Tiffany Tompkins [ttompkins@bradenton.com](mailto:ttompkins@bradenton.com)

### WHY IS FISH PRESERVE IMPORTANT?

“We’re excited ‘cause it’s one of the few pieces of property that will actually be protecting our coastline,” von Hahmann said.

“We’re like a micro-Robinson Preserve,” she added.

One of the main benefits the preserve provides is its mangrove habitat

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection notes that [mangroves](#) provide [ecosystem services](#) including water filtration, erosion prevention and protection from hurricanes and flood damage.

They also serve as a retreat for fish like mullet and a nursery for species like snook and grouper.

01:03 01:30

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A community effort to preserve and restore 100 acres of coastal wildlife habitat and mangrove forest bordering Sarasota Bay and the historic fishing village of Cortez is complete at FISH Preserve. Now, work is underway to add more recreational access. Provided Image *Sarasota Bay Estuary Program*

“The water quality in Sarasota Bay is improving. Large-scale restoration projects like FISH Preserve build on that progress to help restore our fish and wildlife populations,” said Dave Tomasko, executive director of the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program.

The estuary program is one of many groups that have helped in the restoration efforts at the preserve.

The project reeled in a wide network of interest and support, including Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the Southwest Florida Management District, the Environmental Protection Agency, the National and Atmospheric Administration, Manatee County Government and Kiwanis Club.

It also helps shield a way of life in Cortez.

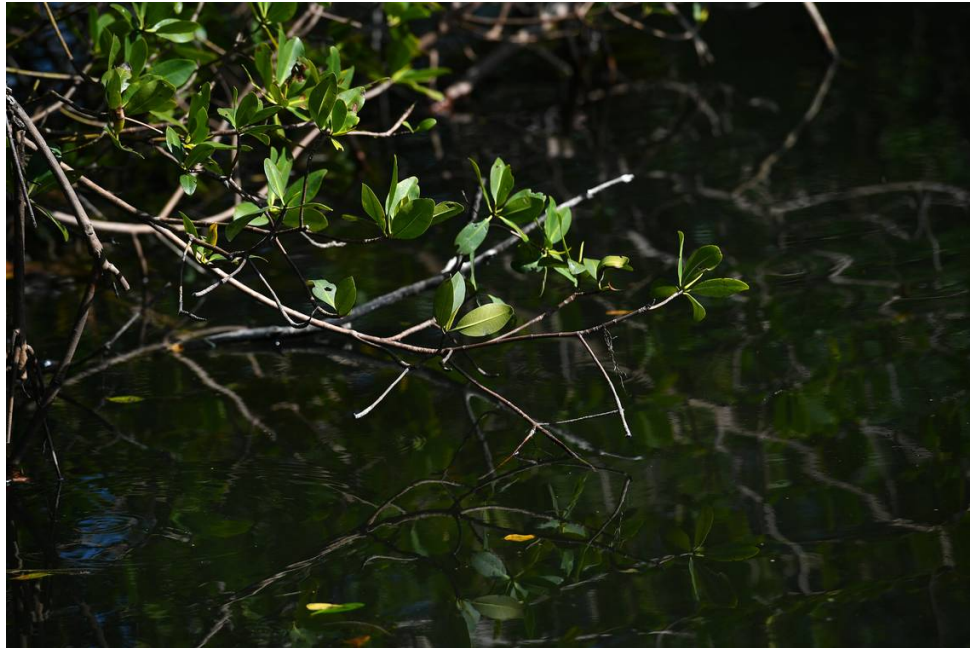
“It’s such a nice buffer for the village,” said Karen Bell, president of [unintelligible] in Cortez and a board member of FISH since its inception. “It will never be developed.”

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Bell said the commercial fishing industry has remained resilient despite setbacks from red tide and water quality problems, and the preserve is a small way to help protect its future.

“Hopefully we’ll be able to continue to stay healthy,” Bell said.



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### PRESERVE IS A LEGACY OF LOCAL SCIENTIST

One of the preserve’s biggest advocates won’t be here to see its completion celebrated.

Marine biologist, retired [Florida Sea Grant agent](#) and founding FISH board member John Stevely was a driving force behind the project.

“The community took the bold step of jumping on that opportunity, knowing that we had to borrow money to do that,” Stevely [told the Herald](#) in 2020. “vision, but eventually we’ll have the whole area restored.”

He was also a founder of the Cortez Commercial Fishing Festival th which he pitched as a “party with a purpose.”

At the fishing festivals, Stevely and other biologists gave “Dock Tall science lessons that inspired an appreciation for marine life.

01:03 01:30

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Following a cancer diagnosis, Stevely died in May 2022 while on a walk at Robinson Preserve, [his obituary](#) said.

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“He and his beloved wife of 40 years, Dr. Theresa Bert, both marine biologists, had just returned from Cape Canaveral where they witnessed a rocket launch and landing with their son, John Bert Stevely. A fitting last act for a scientist who treasured the seas and skies,” it reads.

“We lost one of our best friends and advocates when John passed away,” von Hahmann said. “He was a member of FISH from the beginning, and he helped develop the plan for the restoration.”

Now the community will have another preserve to enjoy, thanks in large part to Stevely.

“He’s probably up there grinning ear to ear knowing it’s finally finished,” von Hahmann said.



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**WHAT’S NEXT FOR FISH PRESERVE?**

A sold-out ribbon cutting celebrating the preserve’s completion will be held on Friday, Nov. 3.

Local officials and EPA Region 4 Regional Administrator Jeaneanne

Though the plan to restore the land is complete, FISH board members continue to make upgrades, including additional tree plantings. The preserve will continue to be funded through the fishing festival, held in February.

Now that nature is on the way to recovery, they hope to make the preserve welcoming for people, too.

Bridges, more walking trails and educational signage are among the planned additions.

01:03 01:30

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Bell also envisions a “skywalk,” or elevated pedestrian bridge, that would give visitors a bird’s eye view of the coast.

“I’d like people to be able to see the vastness of the mangrove forest and the interconnectivity of the bay,” Bell said.

For now, recreation at the preserve is limited to a few trails that wind through the habitat.

Parking to access the preserve is available at Florida Maritime Museum, 4415 119th St. W., Cortez.



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