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Decades of Restoration Culminate in the Opening of FISH Preserve in Cortez

By Manatee Herald Staff Report November 4, 2023

The long-awaited FISH Preserve has finally opened its natural splendor to the public this Friday after 23 years of dedicated grassroots efforts and extensive environmental restoration. This 100-acre coastal wetland, protected and revitalized by the Florida Institute for Saltwater Heritage (FISH), celebrated its inaugural event adjacent to the historic Cortez Fishing Village, reinforcing its connection to the Sarasota Bay.

The journey began in 2000 when FISH initiated a campaign to safeguard this vital piece of coastal land. The subsequent years witnessed a transformation as invasive species were cleared, and new waterways were created to ensure free-flowing connections with Sarasota Bay, aimed at reviving the native aquatic habitats.

The revival of the FISH Preserve represents a triumph of collaboration. Entities such as the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program (SBEP), the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the Southwest Florida Water Management District, the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration joined forces to breathe life back into the preserve.



As nature takes its course, local wildlife has begun to reclaim the preserve. To commemorate this milestone, a ribbon-cutting ceremony took place this Friday at the site. The event's speakers included Dr. Dave Tomasko (Executive Director of the SBEP), Jane Von Hahmann (former Manatee County Commissioner and FISH Treasurer) Jeaneanne Gettle (Acting Regional Administrator for EPA Region 4), Dr. Jay Leverone (SBEP Staff Scientist) and Manatee County Commission Chairman Kevin Van Ostenbridge.

Although the preserve's restoration is complete, public access remains limited to a few foot trails for the time being. The FISH organization, together with its partners, is actively exploring further enhancements, including the addition of boardwalks, more trails, and educational signage to foster a deeper connection between visitors and this revitalized ecosystem.

Dr. Dave Tomasko expressed optimism about the region's environmental future, stating, "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."

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

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