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Year in review: Environment

By **Leslie Lake**

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Loggerhead sea turtles nested on Anna Maria Island's beaches early, from April through September. - Cindy Lane | Sun

MANGROVE VIOLATIONS

In January, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection levied an \$8,500 fine for improper mangrove trimming and debris removal activities that occurred at Carlos Beruff's Aqua development in unincorporated Manatee County in 2022.



Some Aqua mangroves were trimmed to create better views for those occupying the development's multi-family residential buildings. – Joe Hendricks | Sun

FOX HONORED AT CELEBRATION OF LIFE

At the celebration of Suzi Fox's life in January, local dignitaries, family and friends painted a picture of a dedicated advocate for Island turtles, a fun-loving and funny friend, and a caring mother, sister and grandmother. Fox, longtime executive director of Anna Maria Island Turtle Watch and Shorebird Monitoring, died on Sept. 30, 2022 after a fall. More than 150 people attended the event at the Center of Anna Maria Island to pay tribute to Fox.

EARLY START TO SEA TURTLE SEASON

Island sea turtles got off to an early start in 2023 as the first nest of the season appeared on Anna Maria Island. "AMITW got a big surprise early this morning, finding the first loggerhead nest of the season," Anna Maria Island Turtle Watch and Shorebird Monitoring Executive Director Kristen Mazzarella wrote in an April 18 statement. Sea turtle nesting season officially begins May 1 and lasts until Oct. 31.

SUZI FOX DAY DECLARED ON MAY 1

As turtle nesting season began, Anna Maria Island Turtle Watch and Shorebird Monitoring declared May 1 as Suzi Fox Day to honor the legacy of its former executive director.

PINEY POINT CONTAMINATION EXTENDED FURTHER THAN ORIGINALLY THOUGHT

A study showed that contaminated water from the 2021 Piney Point spill, which contributed to algae blooms and red tide in Tampa Bay waterways, traveled farther than originally thought. According to the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program (SBEP), a chemical signature from the spill was found more than 30 miles away, in St. Joseph Sound near Tarpon Springs.

LOGGERHEAD SEA TURTLE 'SUZI' PARTICIPATES IN TOUR DE TURTLES

As hundreds of delighted onlookers gathered to see a publicized turtle release at Coquina Beach, loggerhead sea turtle "Suzi" made a grand entrance from the sand to the water. She hesitated several times walking on the beach, appearing to look at the crowd, but once she reached the water she was in her element and took off swimming. The June 27 release wasn't the last time Suzi's whereabouts was known – she was satellite-tagged and tracked during the Tour de Turtles race.

MULTIPLE TURTLE NESTS RUN OVER

On a daily patrol in July, Anna Maria Island Turtle Watch and Shorebird Monitoring volunteers were shocked and saddened to find multiple turtle nests that had been trampled on and run over with vehicles. On its Facebook page, Turtle Watch posted photos of tire tracks and footprints through multiple nests with marker stakes broken and on the ground. Vehicles are illegal on the beaches of Anna Maria Island. The culprits were not found.

SEA CAPTAINS CATCH POACHERS

The vigilance of three local charter captains resulted in multiple citations against three men for poaching marine life in local waters.

TURTLE HATCHLINGS RESCUED FROM HOLE ON BEACH

Four turtle hatchlings that had fallen into a hole on the beach were found by Holmes Beach Code Enforcement staff on the morning of July 16. While entrapped, the turtles were using up energy they needed for their long swim to the floating sargassum line where they will spend the next few years.

HURRICANE IDALIA CAUSES BEACH EROSION

Hurricane Idalia's Aug. 31 storm surge eroded the Island's renourished beaches, but the full extent of the damage and when it will be repaired is not yet known. "It could be months before any decision on what efforts will be undertaken is made," Manatee County spokesman Bill Logan said in a Sept. 8 email to The Sun.

Mangrove trimming debris at the Aqua property was not properly removed and disposed of. – Rusty Chinnis | Sun

FLAMINGOS FLOCK TO FLORIDA

Hurricane Idalia's Category 3 landfall in late August brought rain, wind, and, surprisingly, flamingos, to Florida. One flamingo was rescued by boaters in the Gulf off St. Petersburg Beach. Nicknamed "Peaches," the bird was brought to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Tampa Bay and was then transferred to the Seaside Seabird Sanctuary in Indian Shores for rehabilitation. After a week, "Peaches" was self-feeding and becoming active. She was released and spotted later at Fort DeSoto in Pinellas County.

HURRICANE IMPACTS TURTLE NESTING

Turtle nesting season ended early this year, with Hurricane Idalia having left a large dent in nesting numbers. "Hurricane Idalia had a major impact on our nesting season, causing the loss of 18.5% of this season's nests," Anna Maria Island Turtle Watch and Shorebird Monitoring Executive Director Kristen Mazzarella said. The last nest on the Gulf of Mexico side of the Island hatched on Sept. 19. The season typically runs through October.

BIOLUMINESCENCE FASCINATES BEACHGOERS

The bioluminescent glow that came off the water in September may be related to the aftermath of Hurricane Idalia, according to one local expert. "This could be related to the nutrient pulse from Idalia," said Dr. Dave Tomasko, executive director of the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program. "The water came up and much of the grass clippings and yard debris on our landscape got dragged back out into the bay as the water receded."

U.S. COAST GUARD SUSPENDS INVESTIGATION INTO SEAPORT MANATEE OIL SPILL

Following testing of multiple potential sources, and with no responsible party identified, the U.S. Coast Guard suspended its investigation on Sept. 26 into the source of an oil spill at SeaPort Manatee, pending any new information. The spill was reported by SeaPort Manatee on Sept. 1, launching the Coast Guard's examination of facilities and ships for evidence of an improper oil discharge.

PINEY POINT CLOSES FIRST OF FOUR WASTEWATER COLLECTION PONDS

In September, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection said the work on the first of four wastewater collection ponds was complete. The pond, built to contain industrial wastewater from phosphate processing operations, is located at the top of a phosphogypsum waste stack.

MANATEE COUNTY COMMISSIONERS REDUCE WETLAND BUFFERS IN A 5-1 VOTE

Commissioners voted on Oct. 5 to default to the less restrictive state of Florida minimums from more restrictive county standards. Buffers between sensitive wetlands and new upland development were reduced from 50 feet to 25 feet. Buffers between outflowing wetlands and new upland development were reduced from 30 feet to 15 feet.

MANATEE PROTECTION, ALGAL BLOOM RESEARCH FUNDED BY FEDS

Federal funding is coming to Florida to support two environmental initiatives critical to the state – the protection of manatees and harmful algal bloom research. Congressman Vern Buchanan's office announced that the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously passed two of his amendments to the Interior and Environment government funding bill, one of which dedicates \$1.15 million for the rescue and rehabilitation of manatees.

– Sun Correspondent Joe Hendricks contributed to this story
