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Beating back developers: How the people of Cortez saved a rare ecosystem

Historic fishing village unites to protect wild Florida

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Since 1880, families have fished the waters of Sarasota Bay. The fishing village of Cortez is a historical landmark; its people are fighting to preserve the natural wonders that lured people here in the first place. A hundred-acre property adjacent to the fishing docks plays a significant role in protecting the waters surrounding Cortez and the livelihoods of so many. "The FISH preserve truly is one of the last undeveloped stretches of land on Sarasota Bay," Dr. Angela Collins told ABC Action News reporter Michael Paluska. Dr. Collins is on the Florida Institute for Saltwater Heritage (FISH) board, the non-profit that saved the FISH preserve.



By: [Michael Paluska](#)

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CORTEZ, Fla. — Since 1880, families have fished the waters of Sarasota Bay. The fishing village of Cortez is a historical landmark; its people are fighting to preserve the natural wonders that lured people here in the first place.

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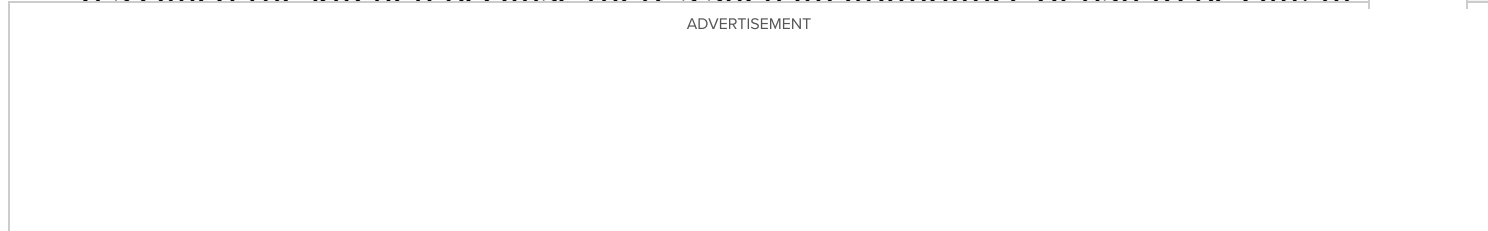
The property, worth millions, is surrounded by development. But, deep inside the preserve, the sound of tidal flows, osprey, and the wind whistling through the trees drowns out the traffic. The natural environment does something else: it supports ecosystems on land and in Sarasota Bay.

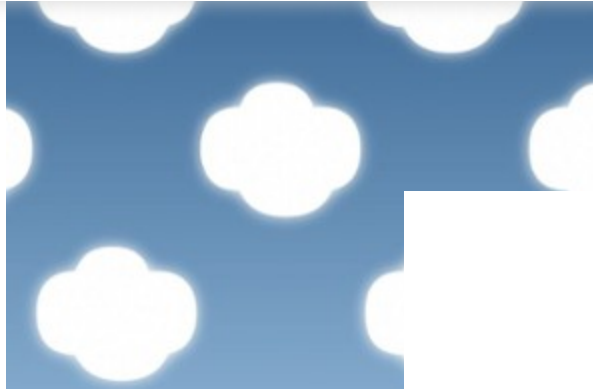
"This is a fishing community. It's one of the oldest working waterfronts remaining in Florida. And a lot of our baby fishes grow up in places just like this," Dr. Collins said. "It's a priceless piece of property. This land will continue to support our environment, local people, and fishing community."

"It's called the kitchen because there's such an abundance of fish to be caught

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"This piece of land was founded by fishermen in the late 1800s Cortez was, and those fishermen called this part of Sarasota Bay the kitchen. They'd go out into the kitchen, and they'd get dinner because it was as simple as just walking out. There was seagrass everywhere; there were scallops, oysters, clams, and then obviously the abundant fisheries resources," Dr. Collins said.

"Without the community effort. We could be standing in the middle of condos?" Paluska said.

"Absolutely!" Collins responded. "That's why the work of the Florida Institute for Saltwater Heritage, the organization that purchased this land is such an amazing success story. Because if you take a look at an aerial image of this area, we've got just development. And there's not very much undeveloped land left. So the fish preserve truly is one of the last undeveloped stretches of land on Sarasota Bay."

The non-profit secured the land, but maintenance and upkeep come with a cost. The annual [Cortez Commercial Fishing Festival](#) is the non-profit's largest fundraiser. It will be held on Feb. 17-18th.

"Why not develop this place and put in some affordable housing or mixed-use

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Estuary Program told Paluska.

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The estuary program helped FISH preserve and restore the habitat to its original environment. The process from start to finish has taken decades. With the final phase of the ecosystem restoration process complete, nature needs to take over.

"I think it's a great achievement, the will of the people fish, you know, the village of Cortez in the FISH board and like our role as an estuary program is to help facilitate the restoration of these projects," Dr. Leverone said. "This property will be protected forever under a conservation easement."

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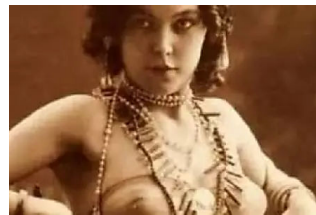
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