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FISH Preserve opens this week

By **Leslie Lake**



The FISH Preserve in Cortez, once a dumping ground for old tires and boats, is now a fully-functioning bayfront ecosystem. - Cindy Lane / Sun

CORTEZ – The vision that FISH (Florida Institute for Saltwater Heritage) members had more than 20 years ago to preserve the environmental integrity of coastal land on Sarasota Bay has come to fruition.

The preserve, on 100 acres of coastal wetland between Cortez Road and Sarasota Bay, will open with a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Friday, Nov. 3 at 10 a.m.

The sold-out event will feature speeches from U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Region 4 Administrator Jeaneanne Gettle and Manatee County Commissioner Kevin Van Ostenbridge.

The FISH Preserve borders the historically significant Cortez commercial fishing village and the waters of Sarasota Bay. It is one of the only untouched waterfront properties on the bay.

The preserve underwent years of environmental restoration which removed exotic vegetation and added waterways to connect to Sarasota Bay and restore aquatic habitats.

“The FISH Preserve came close to getting paved over by developers, however, the community came together to purchase the property in the nick of time,” according to the FISH website. FISH raised the initial funds for the protection of the land in 2000, buying parcels one at a time ever since.

Funding for the first \$60,000 mortgage payment on the land was raised from donations from citizens and conservation-minded companies. Years of proceeds from the annual Cortez Commercial Fishing Festival each February and donations from members and friends allowed FISH to pay off their original mortgage.

A major grant was provided by the Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership, which led to the creation of a tidal stream system. That grant allowed for the creation of new wetland areas and the removal of invasive plants.

“The water quality in Sarasota Bay is improving. Large-scale restoration projects like the 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 preserve is fully restored, but public recreation is currently limited to a few foot trails. FISH and its partners are looking at adding boardwalks, trails and signage.

Restoration of the preserve was a collaborative effort between FISH, the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the Southwest Florida Water Management District, the EPA, the Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.
