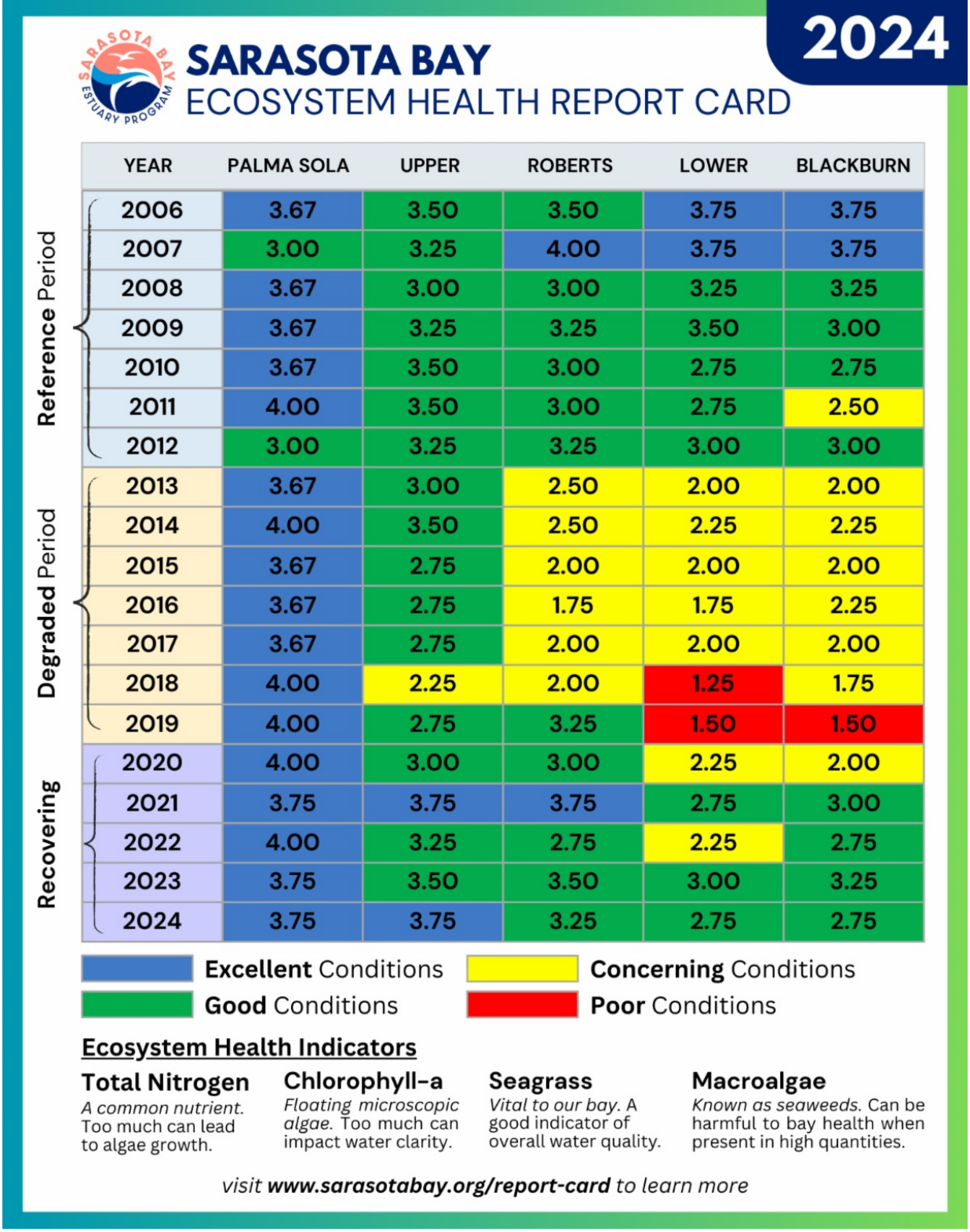


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Sarasota Bay 2024 Report Card Shows a Recovering Bay

The 2024 report card, which encompasses four water quality indicators: nitrogen, chlorophyll-a (a measure of microscopic algae), seagrass, and macroalgae/seaweed, continues to trend in a positive direction compared to the period between 2013-2019. According to Dr. Dave Tomasko, “Since 2020, we’ve had improved water quality, with less nitrogen, lower levels of phytoplankton, less macroalgae, and we’ve stopped the slide in seagrass loss, and have actually recorded a 19% increase in seagrass the last two years.”



YEAR	PALMA SOLA	UPPER	ROBERTS	LOWER	BLACKBURN
2006	3.67	3.50	3.50	3.75	3.75
2007	3.00	3.25	4.00	3.75	3.75
2008	3.67	3.00	3.00	3.25	3.25
2009	3.67	3.25	3.25	3.50	3.00
2010	3.67	3.50	3.00	2.75	2.75
2011	4.00	3.50	3.00	2.75	2.50
2012	3.00	3.25	3.25	3.00	3.00
2013	3.67	3.00	2.50	2.00	2.00
2014	4.00	3.50	2.50	2.25	2.25
2015	3.67	2.75	2.00	2.00	2.00
2016	3.67	2.75	1.75	1.75	2.25
2017	3.67	2.75	2.00	2.00	2.00
2018	4.00	2.25	2.00	1.25	1.75
2019	4.00	2.75	3.25	1.50	1.50
2020	4.00	3.00	3.00	2.25	2.00
2021	3.75	3.75	3.75	2.75	3.00
2022	4.00	3.25	2.75	2.25	2.75
2023	3.75	3.50	3.50	3.00	3.25
2024	3.75	3.75	3.25	2.75	2.75

The increased health of the bay in recent years appears to be mainly a result of the reduced nitrogen loads to the system. The 20% nitrogen load reduction goal set back in 2021 has likely been achieved through wastewater infrastructure upgrades, regional stormwater retrofit projects in Phillippi Creek and Hudson Bayou, completion of several habitat restoration/stormwater retrofit projects, and public awareness around improving the bay's health.

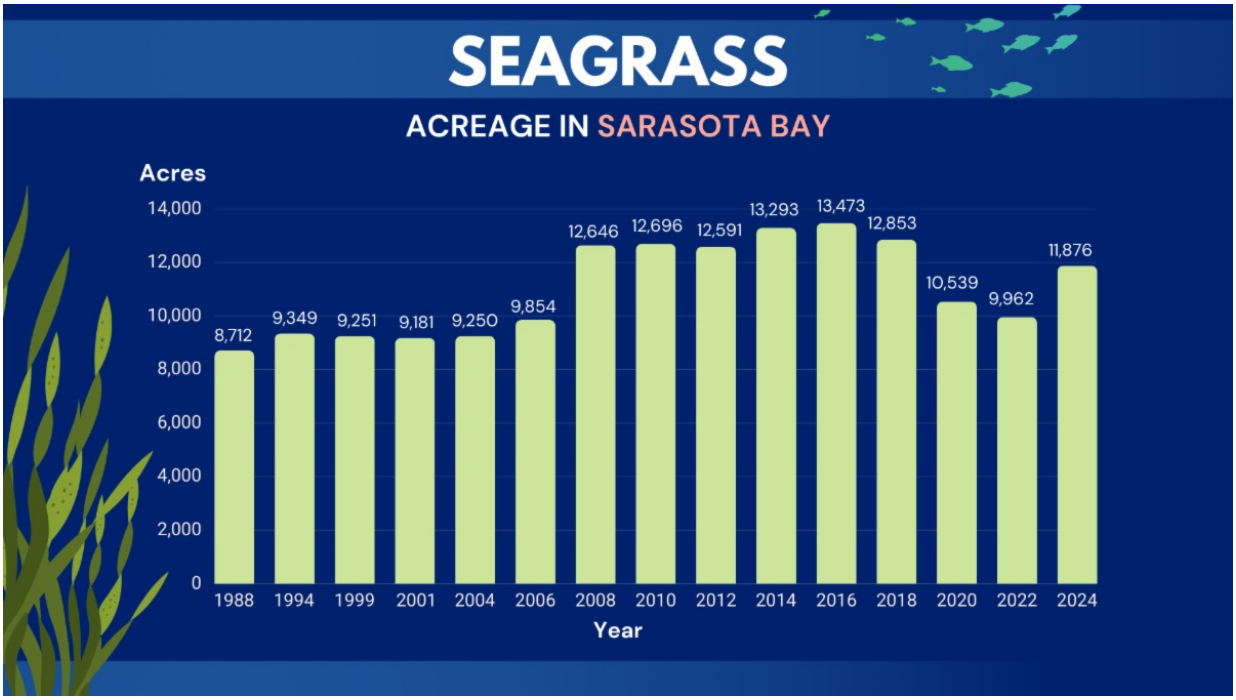
Although this is good news, there is still more to be done, as the Bay is not back to where it was before water quality began to slip away. Plus, 2024 brought impacts from several storms, which are likely the cause for the decline in scores in Roberts, Little Sarasota, and Blackburn Bays.

Overall, the bay's health, while taking a hit, is still in the range of values exhibited during the reference period (2006 – 2012) and supports SBEP's view that it is firmly in recovery mode. These water quality improvements have increased the bay's resiliency, allowing it to handle 2024 weather impacts without collapsing.

Read more about the 2024 Report Card

Gains in Seagrass Coverage in Sarasota Bay Result in Widespread Benefits for Fish & Wildlife

In March, scientists with the Southwest Florida Water Management District released the results of the 2024 seagrass mapping study, revealing that Sarasota Bay has seen an increase of 1,912 acres of seagrass beds since 2022. This marks a 19% increase over the past two years.



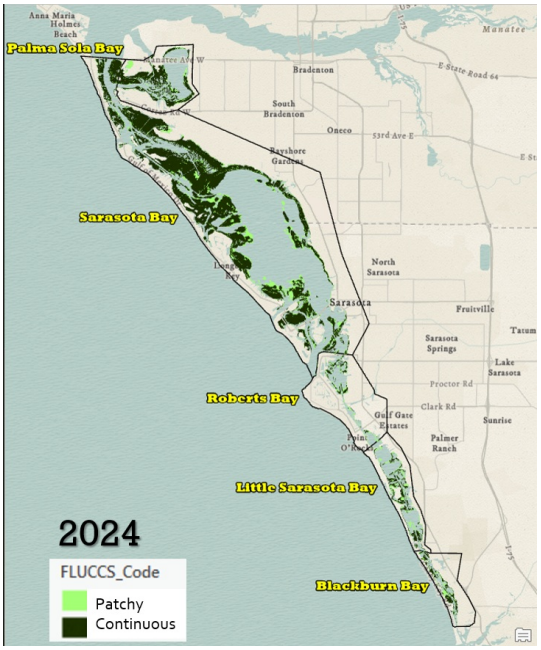
Fish and Wildlife Benefits
Seagrasses are a critical indicator of the ecological health of Sarasota Bay, as they require clean water to thrive and are highly sensitive to changes in water clarity and quality. Healthy seagrass beds provide essential habitats that support a diverse range of marine species. According to researchers at Florida Atlantic University, there are approximately 40,000 fish found in the average acre of seagrass. These figures suggest that the recent seagrass increases in Sarasota Bay would sustain over 75 million fish. Additionally, species such as manatees and green sea turtles, which depend on seagrasses as a primary food source, will also benefit from these local improvements.

Sarasota Bay Segment	1988 (acres)	2016 (acres)	2018 (acres)	2020 (acres)	2022 (acres)	2024 (acres)	% Change in Acreage 2022 to 2024
Palma Sola Bay	1,111	1,258	1,273	1,216	1,200	1,240	3%
Sarasota Bay	6,323	10,659	10,326	8,075	7,591	9,424	24%
Roberts Bay	334	361	349	332	300	304	1%
Little Sarasota Bay	533	806	610	607	578	603	4%
Blackburn Bay	411	390	295	307	294	305	4%
Total	***8,712***	***13,473***	**12,853**	**10,539**	**9,964**	**11,876**	**19%**

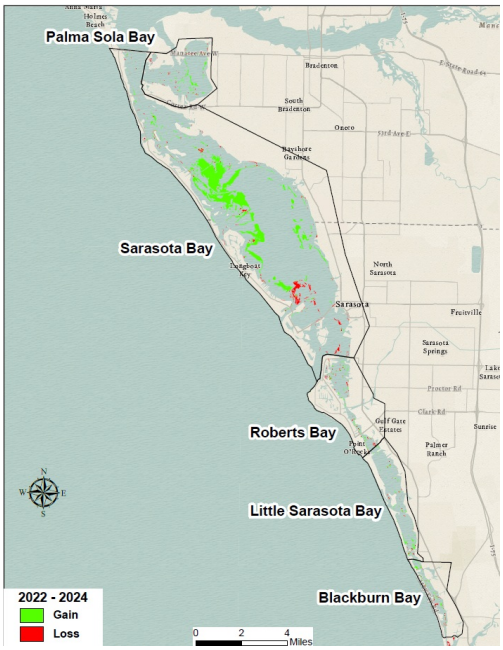
Basis for Improvements
The recent increases are attributed to specific management actions that improved water quality. “Increases did not come about due to transplanting or drought. The increases arose from natural recruitment, based on multiple years of improving water quality,” said Dr. Dave Tomasko. Local

governments' investments in wastewater and stormwater infrastructure have been crucial in reducing nitrogen loads to the bay. “Reduced nitrogen loads in the upper Sarasota Bay appear to be concurrent with a 40% reduction in nitrogen content in Manatee County’s Wastewater Treatment Plant effluent. In southern portions of Sarasota Bay, decreased nitrogen levels correlate with a reduction in wastewater overflow events. Additionally, large-scale stormwater retrofit projects have enhanced treatment for over 6,000 acres of our watershed. Collectively, we believe these actions have set us on track for ecosystem recovery, which is now evidenced by recent gains in seagrass,” Tomasko said.

The Sarasota Bay Estuary Program also underscores the importance of community-level stewardship, including bay-friendly fertilizer use and seagrass-safe boating practices, which can also help to support and maintain these increases.



2024 Seagrass in Sarasota Bay



2024 Seagrass Gains and Losses

Read more about Seagrass

Collaborating for Collective Impact

Florida’s Gulf Coast is home to four National Estuary Programs, all working to help our communities enjoy clean water, healthy fishing grounds, relaxing paddles, tasty seafood, and strong coastal economies. As we continue into 2025, we wanted to share the highlights from this past year and thank everyone who has supported and amplified the impact of our National Estuary Programs.


FLOW STATE
A year of achievements from Florida's Gulf Coast
National Estuary Programs
PENSACOLA & PERDIDO BAYS ESTUARY PROGRAM
TBEP
TAMPA BAY ESTUARY PROGRAM
SARASOTA BAY ESTUARY PROGRAM
COASTAL & HEARTLAND NATIONAL ESTUARY PARTNERSHIP

The United States **National Estuary Program (NEP)** was created in 1987 and works with the EPA, state, and local entities to improve the health of important estuaries through collaborative watershed management.

In 2024, Florida's Gulf Coast NEPs achieved:

70,589 Acres of habitat restoration

21,592 Plants installed

11,994 Pounds of debris removal

9,900 People engaged

4,745 Volunteer hours

273 Seagrass stations monitored

270 Public events

54 Grants awarded

Good things happen when we work **together** for **water**.



SBEP Director Highlights Value of National Estuary Programs at ANEP Conference

This past month, Dr. Dave Tomasko presented at the annual EPA Association of National Estuary Programs (ANEP) meeting, offering highlights from several different estuary programs around the country. The National Estuary Program itself stems from the Clean Water Act and aims to protect and restore the “water quality and ecological integrity” of estuaries. The non-regulatory program allows for a variety of operating structures from local agencies to universities and non-profits in order to best leverage collaboration and management opportunities at the local level. After several decades, many priority waterbodies under the management of a National Estuary Program are showing ecosystem-scale improvements. For example:

- Chesapeake Bay, which was the model for the National Estuary Program, has seen long-term decreases in total nitrogen in almost every part of their sampled area, and their

submerged aquatic vegetation levels are the highest they've been since 2019.

- Sarasota Bay has seen decreasing trends in nitrogen and chlorophyll (i.e. measure of algae) over the last four years and recent increases in seagrass in 2024.
- Galveston Bay's values for nitrogen and oxygen are considered "Good" to Excellent" in almost all sampled watershed segments.
- Narragansett Bay's nitrogen loads have decreased over the past 20 years, as well as phytoplankton (i.e. algae) and hypoxic events (i.e. low oxygen levels that can harm or kill marine life).
- Long Island Sound has reduced their area of hypoxia by 50% since the 1980s and 90s.
- New York / New Jersey Harbor has seen long-term decreases in nitrate in the Hudson River as well as decreases in hypoxia and PCBs (Polychlorinated Biphenyls), and increases in submerged aquatic vegetation since 2014. Between 2017 and 2018, there were 73 whale sightings, 321 sightings of dolphins and beaked whales, and 562 sightings of sea turtles, sharks, rays and other fish in the New York Bight.

There are other success stories as well, demonstrating the impact and efficacy of the program and its collaborative approach to management.

Springing into Action

SBEP kicked off the spring season by celebrating our underwater worlds at **Bay Fest** on March 1st. With help from Sarasota County, the Bay Park, and several partners, over 750 attendees were able to enjoy hands-on activities, crafts, games, food, music, and kayak rides while learning about the bay and how to take care of our environment.





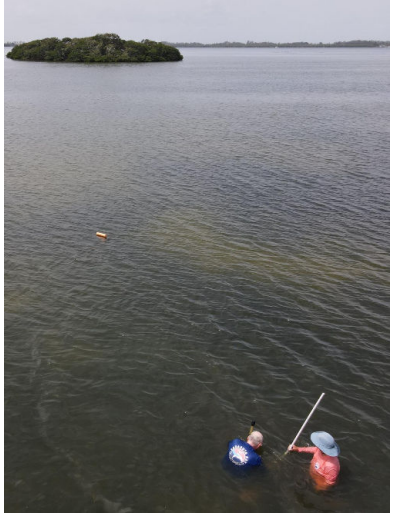


On April 5th, we joined local environmental groups at Big Waters Land Trust for their annual **Wild About Nature** event. Kids learned about the plants and animals that live in our watershed by playing the wildlife olympics and exploring field guides and exhibits at the SBEP booth.





This month, SBEP has been gearing up for **Eyes on Seagrass**, which started last week and will run until April 30th. Returning volunteers and newcomers are surveying 41 different locations in Sarasota Bay for macroalgae (seaweed) and seagrass. This program not only helps inform the Ecosystem Health report card, but this year, it will give SBEP several extra sets of eyes on how our seagrasses are doing after going through the recent 2024 storms.


Upcoming Events



Earth Day Cleanup

Saturday, April 26th from 8:30AM - 11:00AM
The Bay Park, 1055 Boulevard of the Arts, Sarasota

Join SBEP, Suncoast Waterkeeper, and the Bay Park in celebrating Earth Day by giving back to our waterways! Whether you're a kayaker ready to hit the water or a shoreline volunteer keeping things clean on land, we need YOU to make a difference. Free lunch! Stick around after to enjoy the Bay's Earth Day festivities!

Register for the Earth Day Cleanup



Save the Date!
Bowlees Creek Cleanup

Saturday, May 17th from 8:00AM - 12:00PM
Bahia Mar West Marina, 6918 14th St W, Bradenton

Join SBEP, Suncoast Aqua Ventures, and partners for a cleanup of Bowlees Creek. Stay tuned for more details to come!

Habitat Restoration Projects Underway in 2025

As part of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA, formerly the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, or BIL) funding, SBEP has been working hard on several habitat restoration projects – with more in the pipeline. Many of the 2024 projects are in the permitting stages, and plans for 2025 projects are getting off the ground. Stay tuned as these progress.

SBEP RESTORATION PROJECTS

Funded through the Infrastructure Investment Jobs Act (IIJA), formerly known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL)

Project	Description & Partner(s)	Year	Cost (IIJA)
FISH Preserve	Constructed tidal creek habitats, invasive plant removal, enhanced public access. **Partner**: Florida Institute for Saltwater Heritage.	'22	$700,000
GT Bray Park	Stream restoration and stormwater pond retrofit. **Partners:** City of Bradenton, Manatee County	'23	$900,000
Artificial Reefs	Habitat for commercial fish species, enhanced bay recreation. **Partner:** Manatee County, Sarasota County	'23	$220,000
Dr. MLK Park	Shoreline restoration, kayak launch, fishing pier, stormwater treatment, native plants, educational exhibits. **Partner**: City of Sarasota	'24	$200,000
Longboat Key Bayfront Park Shoreline	Modify the fiberglass seawall with the attachment of concrete panels that support growth of oyster communities. **Partner:** The Town of Longboat Key	'24	$500,000
Sarasota Baywalk at City Island	New boardwalk, debris removal, additional signage. **Partner:** City of Sarasota	'24	$200,000
Matheny Creek	Stormwater treatment (ponds and swales), facilitated cistern use for adjacent community. **Partner:** Sarasota County	'25	$600,000
Flamingo Cay	Restoration of upland spoil area via contouring and planting, mangrove migration corridor, primitive paddle-up campsites. **Partner:** Manatee County	'25	$160,000
Rose Park Phase I	Living shoreline design and permitting. **Partner:** Manatee County	'25	$150,000
Rose Park Phase II	Construction of living shoreline. **Partner:** Manatee County	'26	$500,000
City of Sarasota Bayfront Park South Shoreline	Shoreline restoration and beach stabilization, kayak launch, native plantings, small watercraft mooring. **Partner:** City of Sarasota	'26	$400,000
Total			$4,530,000

Complete | In Progress | Pending

Updated 4/10/25

SBEP Citizens Advisory Committee Academy visits Manatee County Water Treatment Facility





The SBEP Citizens Advisory Committee provides community input to SBEP and assists the Program in sharing information with the public. The CAC also develops action plans to support SBEP programs and projects to influence public policies that impact our Bay and its resources. Throughout 2025, the CAC will be exploring bay-related infrastructure and engaging with marine scientists and researchers. This initiative, called the "CAC Academy," is designed to deepen the committee's understanding of how estuaries are impacted and managed in urbanized environments. On February 3, the CAC visited the Manatee County Water Treatment Facility, where they learned about the sourcing, treatment, and management of household water, as well as how local governments balance supply and demand.

Interested in being a part of the CAC? Email megan@sarasotabay.org for more information.

Spread the Word!

Bay Explorers Summer Experience Applications Open

Big Waters Land Trust is hosting a free, all-inclusive outdoor adventure for high school students ages 14 to 18 in Sarasota or Manatee counties. All participants will be provided transportation, lunch and snacks each day, all supplies and equipment for daily activities, a pair of water shoes to keep, and a $100 stipend.



Have You Heard About RainCheck?

Sarasota County's new RainCheck Program offers a rebate for installing certain features around your home that help improve water quality and allow rain to soak into your landscape. Examples include:

- Rain gardens and bioswales - up to $500
- Downspout planter boxes - up to $1,000
- Impervious Replacement (i.e. driveways & sidewalks) - $5 per sq ft up to $5,000
- Modified Downspouts - up to $50



Take the Plastics Survey for Dolphin Research

The Sarasota Dolphin Research Program and The College of Charleston are studying how plastics and the chemicals added to plastics (called phthalates) in the environment impact bottlenose dolphins in Sarasota Bay, and what this could mean for people living near the coast. By taking this survey, you'll help us understand how much people know, so we can use that information to create materials that teach people how to protect dolphins in Sarasota Bay and other locations.



Lights, Camera, Action!

SBEP in the News

Communication is vital to the protection and restoration of the bay. Check out the latest clips and articles featuring SBEP efforts.



Sarasota Bay Estuary Program checks seagrass health (VIDEO)
Bradenton Herald

"The Sarasota Bay Estuary Program made a trip to upper Sarasota Bay to check on the health and growth of seagrasses."



Midnight Pass reopening has made Little Sarasota Bay better in long run, scientist says
WFLA

"Tomasko explained the environment will be better over in Little Sarasota, but what it was before was a thriving habitat for the Florida manatee and a great nursing area for juvenile wildlife."

Read More SBEP in the News

Bite Sized Bay News



Midnight Pass “still evolving,” county keeps hopeful watch

"Now, thanks to a $500,000 state appropriation received just prior to the 2024 storms, Sarasota County is working with a variety of stakeholders... to monitor the pass and keep it flowing as a tidal connection between the Gulf of Mexico and Little Sarasota Bay." (Siesta Sand)



County announces additional conservation property near Eilling Eide

"Sarasota County announced that it has secured a 14.5-acre conservation easement on the Elling Eide property. The acquisition, made through the Environmentally Sensitive Lands Protection Program for $821,666, will safeguard critical habitats and wildlife corridors. The property is bordered by Little Sarasota Bay and Bayonne Preserve and lies within the protection area at the latter." (ABC7)



Experts alarmed after researching bottlenose dolphins off coast of Florida: 'There's a growing concern'

"Researchers from the College of Charleston and the Sarasota Dolphin Research Program have discovered alarming levels of plastic particles in dolphin stomach contents and breath. Even more troubling, chemicals used to make plastic, known as phthalates, have been found in dolphin urine." (TCD)

Community & Partner Events

Check out upcoming green events from over 100 local organizations on the **Green Living Toolkit Community Events Calendar!**



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Contact us

info@sarasotabay.org | (941) 955-8085
111 S. Orange Avenue, Suite 200W
Sarasota, FL 34236

Sarasota Bay Estuary Program | 111 S. Orange Avenue Suite 200W | Sarasota, FL 34236 US

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