Please look for yourself in the photos taken at the Seagrass Survey and join us in sharing your own photos here: 2018 Seagrass Survey

Over 100 remarkable volunteers -16 boats and 8 paddlers- from around Sarasota took part in Sarasota County’s Annual Seagrass Survey at the Sarasota Sailing Squadron. This citizen science event has become a staple in Sarasota Bay and a unique way to connect community members not only to their native environment but to one another. An important part of citizen science is to realize the strides we can make locally to understand our unique environment and how it unites us to a global movement of citizen science! Volunteers also meet and are trained by scientists from Mote Marine Laboratory, the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program, and nearby municipalities. Check out how citizen science is moving into the future with data collection apps like SURVEY123. This is data collected this last Saturday that was directly loaded into a seagrass database.

Over the years Seagrass Survey volunteers have become the seagrass ambassadors of the community. You can check us out at: SNN News, the Longboat Observer, the Herald-Tribune, and Abc7.
Seagrass beds are not only a way to track water quality — **Seagrass thrives when water is clean and clear** — but they provide multiple benefits to us. Seagrass removes pollution from the water (excessive amounts of nitrogen and phosphorus from fertilizer runoff can cause algae blooms.) Seagrass meadows stabilize the sea floor preventing sand from being stirred up during storms or when a boat passes by. Just like land plants, they produce oxygen. Seagrass acreage in Sarasota Bay alone produces enough oxygen for Sarasota and Manatee residents to breathe easy every day.
Every year the data we collect takes a ‘snapshot’ of the seagrass meadows of Sarasota Bay. This continued effort over the years is helping scientists and community members to build a better understanding of the health of these diverse ecosystems. Here’s the good news: seagrass meadows are recovering and increasing in acreage in recent years (up 54% from 1988).

In addition, it is very important we get in the water and characterize what exactly is happening in our underwater backyard. Volunteers this year collected over 140 survey points (up 20% from last year.) At each survey point they estimated how much seagrass was present, what species composed that area, an average blade length per species, the water clarity, and the algae present. Since seagrass serves another important purpose as a fish habitat and source of food: fish, invertebrates, and marine mammal sightings were also noted during the survey. View a demo of the techniques used in the Seagrass Survey training video: CLICK HERE.
The final results of the survey and comparisons to previous years will soon be available in more detail on the Sarasota County Water Atlas. Overall, participants found that the visibility in the water was much more clear than last year. They also identified larger amounts of algae in certain areas than had been seen previously. Another significant find: returning citizen scientists reported a shift in what species they found in areas they had surveyed in the past. Different species will grow depending on changes in water conditions. This will be important to understand in the coming years as scientists are also tracking species shifts in other areas of Florida.

SPOTTED WHILE ON THE BAY: Bonnethead shark, manatee, Oyster toadfish with eggs, sheepshead, coral, urchins, clams, and scallops!

Back on land the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program and partners provided educational opportunities for those who wanted to learn more about the benefits of seagrass to humans and animals and what we can do to protect these valuable and diverse ecosystems.
Around the Bend Nature Tours led seagrass dipnet trips for over 50 participants in Ken Thompson Park and Armando Ubeda from Florida Sea Grant led mangrove talks. FWC, Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium, Sarasota Bay Watch, Manatee County Parks, Reef Innovations the FL Department of Environmental Protection and Longboat Key Turtle Watch provided educational crafts and displays that were fun for the whole family. The Science and Environment Council and Sarasota County provided information about how to keep our stormwater clean by not using fertilizer during the restricted season (June 1-September 30) and picking up pet waste and plastic trash. Sunshine Community Compost and 1 Stop Compost facility helped festival attendees sort their waste so that we could reduce the footprint of our event. Volunteers from Marie Selby Botanical Gardens also conducted an independent Seagrass Survey of the aquatic meadows behind the iconic gardens.

Multiple partners also donated prizes for the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program for the nature festival raffle (Mote, Clyde Butcher Photography, Tree-Umph, Almost Heaven Kayak Adventures, A Silent Sport Outfitters, Florida Underwater Sports, LeBarge Tropical Cruises, Inspired by Paradise, Wayne Adventures and Scuba Quest). Many thanks to them. Shane Secor donated his time and talent to lend some musical ambience to our day and Croz’s Surf Shack for the delicious food. We would also like to send a very warm thank you to the Sarasota Sailing Squadron and the City of Sarasota for being gracious and generous hosts to our event over the years.

Thank you again to all the volunteers, volunteer-trainers, boat captains, Mote scientists, donors and exhibitors who have contributed their time in a world where every minute is precious. You have adopted this event into your hearts and let your passion for clean water and an engaged community bring us all together to do something great!