

Despite Damages, Florida Seems Addicted to Sand Pumping

Investigative Series:
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This year, approximately \$117 million in federal tax dollars will be spent on “beach nourishment” in Florida, augmented by at least \$30 million from state coffers, plus funds from local entities. Some of that money will go to vital dune restoration projects, but most will go to dredge-and-fill projects ranging from 200,000 to 1.5 million cubic meters in volume.

Florida Statute, Title XI, Chapter 161, declares “beach nourishment” to be in the best interests of Florida citizens. More than \$886 million has been spent since the 1970s on beach-fill projects—more than in any other state. As covered in the April 2005 issue of *Florida Sportsman*, almost all peer-reviewed science and observations by anglers and divers point to serious ecological and recreational expenses. Advocates for the dredging and consulting industries justify the work with economic studies highlighting the need to maintain beach cosmetics for tourism revenue and property taxes.

Debbie Flack, Florida Shore and Beach Preservation Association’s (FSBPA) director of legislative affairs said, “Florida’s beaches create 706,000 jobs, and tax revenues from the properties they protect support our hospitals and schools.”

Flack is a former chief of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection’s (DEP) Office of Beaches and Coastal Systems. Flack’s primary lobbying tool is an economic assessment of Florida beaches conducted by Dr. William Strong, an economist at Florida Atlantic University. In 1997, she helped convince state legislators to create the comprehensive beach-funding plan. Subsequently, Flack told the *Gannett News Service*, “I tried to package this as an environmental program, but our selling point was economic development.”

Indeed, tourism and property taxes account for massive economic injections. Flack said the numbers exceed \$50 billion to date, without offering a specific time frame. And while Strong’s research is reviewed, it seems paradoxically comprehensive and generic. While the survey counts all beachgoers, the research



Dad fishes while mom and kids play at Phipps Reef, in Palm Beach. A beach fill project here purports to restore recreation, but families come because of the reefs.

does not take into account why individuals go to the beach, or to specific beaches. For example, it does not say how much divers spend to scuba dive healthy reefs in clean water in Southeast Florida, or how much anglers spend to catch pompano on Indian River County beaches, or how much surfers spend because of the waves that break over the nearshore reefs in Brevard County. (The latter group, you might be surprised to learn, contribute more than \$1 billion annually to Florida’s economy on the statewide level.)

The dredging lobby points to mitigation efforts. These, however, rarely entail or succeed in providing kind-for-kind habitat mitigation. Mitigation for nearshore reef burial usually entails an artificial reef placed in water too deep to provide the shallow structure required by juvenile snappers, grunts and groupers, among many other species that depend on unburied nearshore reefs.

“It’s not that we want these projects to impact anglers, but anglers represent a much smaller percentage than

tourism overall,” Flack said.

A Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) study, *Economics of Fish and Wildlife Recreation*, attributes more than \$5.5 billion of the annual gross state product to saltwater fishing, and nearly 60,000 jobs. The sum is likely an underestimation because shorebound anglers don’t need a fishing license, and the Florida Marine Industries Association estimates that more than half of the reason for boating is fishing. The FWC estimate for dollars generated by boating is \$15.7 billion. In addition, agency officials admit—and dive shop owners in Dade, Broward, Palm Beach and Martin counties verify—that reefs that supported diving have been destroyed or obscured for long intervals by dredging projects since the 1970s.

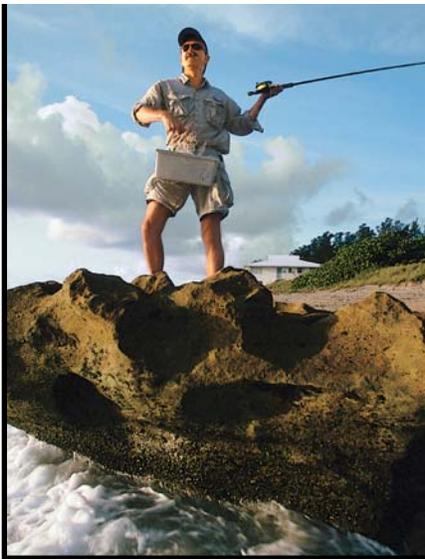
Dr. Grant Gilmore, the scientist who first cataloged the fish in the Indian River Lagoon, and along the Treasure Coast’s many nearshore reefs, says these projects may be curbing angler success and enthusiasm no matter where you fish in salt water.

CONSERVATION FRONT continued

“The nearshore environment is so important to so many juvenile gamefish and forage species that individually and cumulatively these projects can impact fishing off the beach, in the lagoons and on the offshore reefs,” he said. According to Gilmore and other top scientists, juvenile gag grouper, mangrove snapper, yellowtail, mutttons, lane snapper, flounder, permit, pompano, grunts, assorted drums and all sea turtles—adult or juvenile—can be impacted due to habitat loss or diminishment of forage.

A search discovered 11 peer-reviewed scientific papers that documented serious impacts, and increasingly, agency-generated papers are recognizing more of the impacts anglers complain about. But Howard Marlowe, Director of Legislative Affairs for the American Shore and Beach Preservation Association (ASBPA), and who represents Martin County and other Florida municipalities, disagrees with independent scientists, anglers who have observed impacts, and divers who witness them.

Marlowe and the ASBPA aggressively attack anyone who questions the environmental impacts or economic equity of large-scale coastal dredging, such as the National Wildlife Federation and D.C.-based Taxpayers for Common Sense.



Left, reefs provide natural buffers and awesome angling. Right, filled beaches are more erosion prone and leave escarpments difficult for anglers, never mind sea turtles, to climb.

In a phone interview per request of *Florida Sportsman*, Marlowe stated categorically that, “Fish catches have never been interrupted for more than 30 days by beach re-nourishment. And there’s evidence that shows the organisms living in the beach return quickly.”

Fishermen and divers—witnesses to serious impacts from past projects—are appalled by ASBPA/FSBPA lobbying tactics.

“Their approach reminds me of tobacco industry lobbyists,” said Jim Harter, president of the Stuart Fly Anglers club. “We demand an opportunity to rebuke him before the Martin County Commission.”

Marlowe and Co., which specializes in this style of lobbying, represents at least 30 municipalities around the country. Martin County, Florida, alone pays him \$39,500 per year. According to FSBPA’s 990 forms, Flack earns \$103,000 for lobbying for dredging funds, and according to other news sources, she also represents individual municipalities.

Because of the war in Iraq, Marlowe and Flack face increasingly tight-fisted legislators, who are debating funding allocations for Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) projects, which include beach nourishment projects. WRDA would also fund the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, but Everglades Restoration must compete with the beaches for attention six months after four hurricanes racked Florida, the most in over 100 years. But Flack and Marlowe are extremely close with some legislators, consulting companies and agency personnel that depend on dredging contracts.

For example, at a St. Lucie County meeting sponsored by state legislators, Flack was given a seat and a microphone alongside legislators and senior DEP officials.

“We’re not only going to re-nourish eroded beaches, we’re going to add to beaches that aren’t eroded yet,” she promised a large audience of mostly beachfront property owners. DEP personnel, as well as a number of county employees, nodded in agreement. We recognized Martin County Coastal Engineer Kathy FitzPatrick, whose boss, Don Donaldson, is Chair of FSBPA.

Critics say that the dredging lobby is governing our beaches, and that Harter’s tobacco analogy is apropos—that beachfront interests are addicted to sand pumping. The addiction metaphor works in terms of what scientists, anglers and divers say, that “beach nourishment” is contributing to the steady decline of our coastal ecosystems.

And, it looks like we’re running out of the drug.

“Most of the compatible sand, the cheap sand at least, is gone in the southeastern counties,” said Phil Flood, an

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environmental manager with DEP's Beaches office.

That's a concern for some local governments because economic analyses and Army Corps permits show that "shoreline protection" is the primary benefit of the beaches. The tax bases generated by high-density, oceanfront properties keep property taxes down. And, nourished beaches have in places performed well as buffers, but the durations of their storm-shielding capabilities vary depending on the wave environment, age, design, sediment type, storm intensity and storm frequency.

"It appears to me that many of these projects disappear more rapidly than predicted for the re-nourishment cycle," said Dr. Robbin Trindell, FWC's senior sea turtle researcher.

Critics also say beach-fill projects merely give beachfront property owners a false sense of security about living in danger zones.

"It's psychological," said Steve Ellis, Vice President of Programs for Taxpayers for Common Sense. "When people see a big flood control project—which is what these things are—they feel they're safe. Beach nourishment encourages unsustainable growth and keeps people in harm's way. We've all seen it time and again where hurricanes kill people, destroy property,



Pelicans ambush mullet on reefs at Phipps Park. Turtle experts confirm there's no reason to expand the beach, and the reefs provide essential food and cover for juveniles.

someone rebuilds, and it happens again."

It's not clear if people working in the lucrative beach-building industry are counted among the 706,000 jobs. ASBPA/FSBPA is largely comprised of the dredgers, engineers, agency personnel and sundry consultants who make a living off these high-dollar projects. A handful of dredging, engineering and environmental consulting groups score these lucrative contracts, and the projects encourage growth in agencies such as the Army Corps of Engineers, which relative to size enjoys one of the biggest budgets in government.

Many of these consultants and bureaucrats sit on conservation boards. They say the close relationships and partnerships facilitate the permitting process and help ensure better projects. Conservationists, anglers and divers say the dredging industry has become government.

"Agencies are working at cross pupos-

es and individuals from the Corps, DEP and the consultants have clear conflicts of interests," said Dan Clarke, Director of Cry of the Water, a Broward-based coral monitoring and diving group.

Although the excessive dredging and pumping increasingly incense sportsmen, beachfront property owners demand the projects and some downplay the environmental impacts.

"We've been writing letters demanding re-nourishment of the mid-reach section [Brevard County] long before the hurricanes," said Cliff Dickinson, founder of Salvage Our Shoreline (SOS), a non-profit organization dedicated exclusively to getting a dredge-and-fill project on a nearshore reef system, declared Essential Fish Habitat/Habitat Area of Particular Concern, one with a 15-year history of protection.

"There ain't a fish in the ocean that can't live in a little deeper water," he said. Peer-reviewed studies that refute him include one entitled *Nearshore Hardbottom Fishes of Southeast Florida and Effects of Habitat Burial Caused By Dredging*. It states, in the contexts of snappers and grunts on the windward side of barrier islands in East Florida, "There are no other natural habitats in the same nearshore areas that can support equivalent abundances of early life stages."

His team mobilized some condo owners for a county commission meeting, where Commissioner Jackie Colon said she would "crush" anyone who opposed the project.

According to the SOS website, a campaign objective is to, "Identify and publicize the contact information of any potential roadblocks." A California-based surfing group called *Save the Waves* went to bat for disenfranchised local surfers, anglers and divers and filed an official letter of complaint about Colon's language and Salvage Our Shoreline's tactics. Next month, we explore why more sustainable coastal management tools aren't being used.

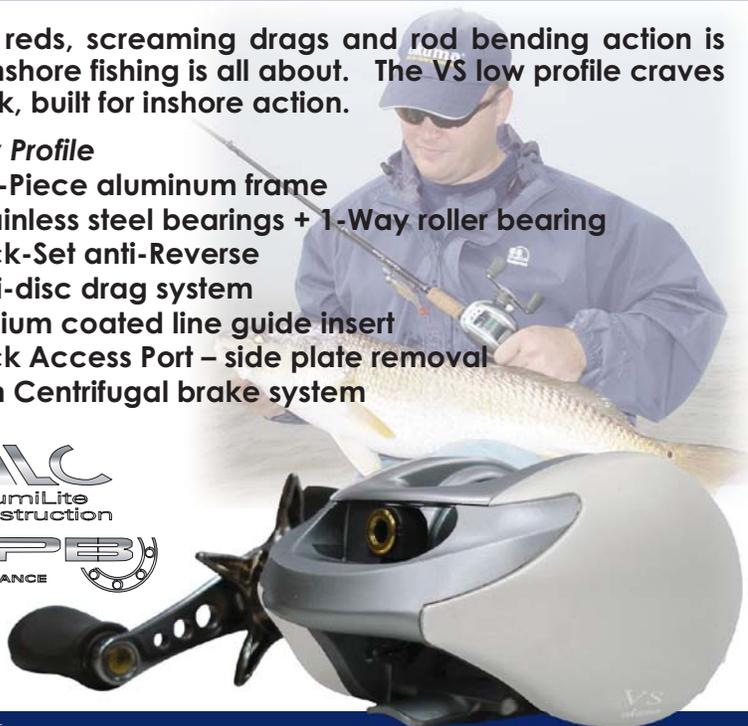
—Terry Gibson

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