

FLORIDA'S COASTAL REGIONS ARE ITS MOST IMPORTANT ASSET

Coasts are important economically and biologically, as well as aesthetically, and are the choice of residence for more than 75% of the State's population. The principal transportation terminals for people and goods, most of the commercial centers, and many of the major industrial centers and military bases are in our coastal region. It is visited by almost all of the approximately 41 million tourists who visit the state each year. Florida's beaches are one of the most valuable natural resources and they have made the state a destination point for vacationers from all over the world. The relationship between Florida's tourist industry with that industry's tremendous economic impact to the state, and Florida's beach resources is well established. It is not an overstatement to say that, "as goes Florida's beaches, so goes Florida's tourist economy."

Florida, especially its coastal counties, has experienced extremely rapid growth since the 1960's. Growth has caused tremendous pressure on the coastline, and has threatened its attractiveness as a natural area. During the past 20 years, Florida's leaders began to recognize that many of the State's coastal areas were in serious trouble. Man's uncontrolled and unplanned activities were dredging coastal resources at an unprecedented rate. Flood control measures and land development caused water shortages and degraded water quality in the Everglades Basin and much of Southeast Florida. Estuarine resources, dependent upon freshwater runoff in proper amounts, quality and timing were being threatened. Several coastal rivers were becoming open sewers, and were in danger of being destroyed. Many major shellfish beds were declared unsafe and some were destroyed.

Legislation dealing specifically with coastal management was first passed in 1970, when the Florida Legislature created the Coastal Coordinating Council. Council members and staff were involved in coastal planning from 1970 through 1975, and considerable progress was made towards the development of a coordinated Coastal Resource Management Program. Legislation in 1977 transferred those powers and duties to the then Department of Environmental Regulation (DER). In 1978, the Legislature renewed its commitment to coastal management with passage of the Florida Coastal Management Act (FCMA). The program was structured around existing statutes and rules with emphasis on improved coordination of state management efforts. The DER was designated lead agency with the responsibility for the specific functions required by the FCMA and related federal legislation. In April, 1992, administrative responsibility for the FCMA was transferred from DER to the Department of Community Affairs (DCA). As lead agency for the program, the DCA now coordinates program implementation and administers a grant program which allocates federal funds to various local governments.

In 1987, Florida's Legislature took specific steps to protect and restore the state's beaches and coastline by mandating a beach management planning effort and directing the then Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Division of Beaches and Shores to undertake actions necessary to develop a Comprehensive Beach Management Plan. As part of this mandate, the Legislature also directed applicable authorities, such as the Jupiter Inlet District (JID), to institute Comprehensive Inlet Management Plans, in recognition of the fact that inlets alter the natural drift of beach quality sand, often resulting in erosion to the downdrift beaches. Inlet management districts such as the JID were directed to place dredged material on downdrift beaches to compensate for the

decrease in littoral drift resulting from the presence of each inlet. The District's Inlet Management Plan is an outgrowth of this process. Other local initiated efforts to protect our coastline include the designation of various portions of the Loxahatchee River as Wild and Scenic and the creation of the Loxahatchee/Lake Worth Creek Aquatic Preserve.

No other area in Florida is as vital or as much in need of attention as our coast. For example, coastal estuaries are, acre for acre, the most productive areas on earth. They can produce four times as much plant growth in a year as the most intensively fertilized and sprayed corn field. This plant material forms the bottom link of the food chain that supports ocean life. Coastal waters also serve as spawning and nursery areas for a tremendous variety of marine life. Roughly 90 commercial species of fish, including 7 of the 10 most valuable, depend on coastal waters at one or more stage of their life cycles. Of course, fish and wildlife are not the sole occupants of the coastal zone. Today 50% of our population lives within 50 miles of the coast, and the growth rate in coastal areas is 3 times the national average. Similarly, ocean oriented recreation is up to an average 10 days per year for every man, woman and child in the country. However, these opportunities become increasingly threatened, with only 2% of the coast now in public ownership for such recreational use.

The health and conservation of coastal and marine resources is vital for the environment and economy of our nation and for Florida in particular, the state with the longest coastline (over 8,000 miles) in the continental U.S. Unfortunately, the presence of a sound management program such as Florida's does not guarantee that the coastal zone will be wisely managed. The interest and participation of the public is also crucial. Those who wish to learn more about keeping Florida's beaches clean and its marine resources can call Pine Jog at 686-6600. Working together, this commitment to the wise husbandry of coastal resources will have a major impact on what will happen to our coastline.