



The Nature Conservancy / Florida Chapter

INDIAN RIVER LAGOON

Saving Florida's Last Great Places

imperiled plants & animals

- sea turtles
- West Indian manatee
- Johnson's seagrass
- smalltooth sawfish
- Atlantic salt marsh snake
- Eastern indigo snake
- four-petal paw paw
- wood stork
- Florida scrub-jay
- peregrine falcon
- giant air plant
- American crocodile



Indian River Lagoon © SJRWMD

Description

The Indian River Lagoon is the most diverse estuary in North America, harboring 50 imperiled plant and animal species, including the wood stork, green sea turtle and giant air plant. Lagoon waters are home to nearly one-third of the nation's West Indian manatee population, and its barrier island beaches provide some of the most important sea turtle nesting habitat in the Western Hemisphere.

Stretching 156 miles along Florida's east coast — from Ponce Inlet in Volusia County to Jupiter Inlet in Palm Beach County — the lagoon is an important economic resource for Florida. It supports a multi-million dollar commercial fishing industry

and many recreational and tourism opportunities, including boating, fishing and bird-watching.

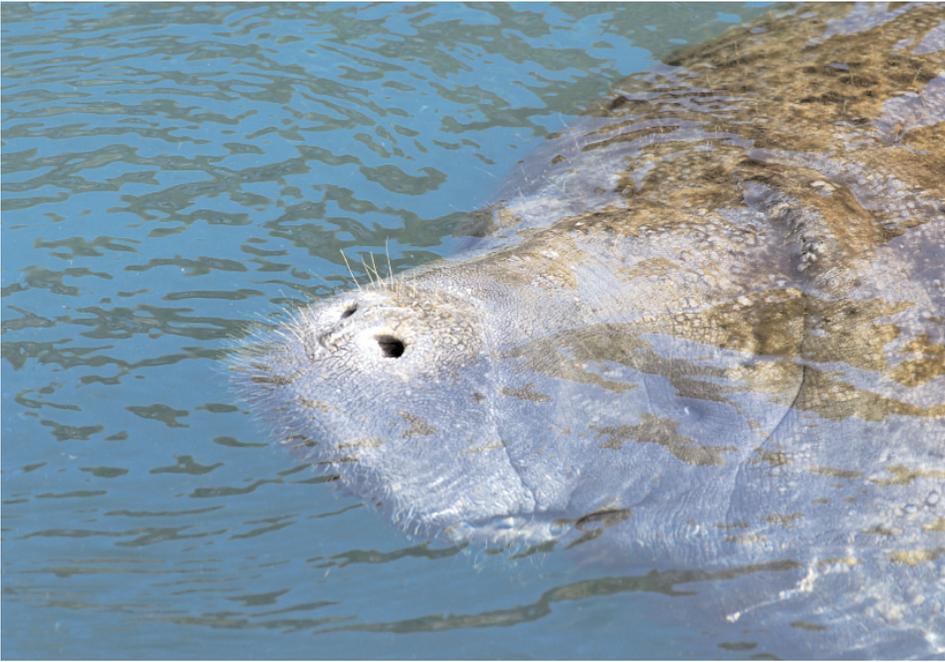
The Indian River Lagoon has long been recognized for its remarkable diversity. President Theodore Roosevelt designated Pelican Island as the first National Wildlife Refuge in 1903. Since then, three more National Wildlife Refuges and a National Seashore have been established in the lagoon region. In 1990, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency designated the lagoon an Estuary of National Significance.

Threats

From 1990 to 2000, population growth in the counties bordering the lagoon increased by 25 percent.

As a result, lagoon water quality and biological productivity have been affected by increased nutrient levels and other pollutants from storm-water runoff. An extensive system of drainage and agricultural canals has altered the natural mix of fresh-water and saltwater in the lagoon, further degrading water quality.

Rapid development has led to the destruction and loss of mangrove and salt marsh habitat along the lagoon's shoreline. In the 1950s, more than 40,000 acres of mangrove and salt marsh — important nursery habitats for fish, crustaceans and shellfish — were isolated to create mosquito impoundments. While much of this habitat has been reconnected to the lagoon by



West Indian manatee © SJRWMD

blowing rocks preserve

The Conservancy's Blowing Rocks Preserve is a 73-acre barrier island sanctuary bordered by the Atlantic Ocean and the Indian River Lagoon. Its Anastasia limestone shoreline is the largest on the Atlantic coast. During extreme high tides and after storms, seas force plumes of saltwater up to 50 feet skyward, an impressive sight for which the preserve was named. A mile-long beach provides critical nesting habitat for sea turtles.

The preserve's Hawley Education Center hosts educational and art exhibits and a series of educational programs throughout the year. Visitors can also explore a boardwalk and trail with interpretive signs along the Indian River Lagoon, a native plant garden and a beachside nature trail.

culverts, other buffer lands remain to be protected and restored.

Habitat destruction on lands surrounding the lagoon has also occurred from the influx of invasive, non-native species, like Brazilian pepper and Australian pine.

Conservancy Action

The Nature Conservancy is working at multiple levels to address the varied and complex threats to the Indian River Lagoon.

The Conservancy works with the state of Florida, local governments, water management districts, and local organizations and citizens to protect and manage critical natural areas along the lagoon and within the lagoon watershed. This includes coordinating efforts of the Indian River Lagoon Blueway Project — a state project to acquire more than 22,000 acres of buffer lands along the lagoon.

The Conservancy has organized and co-sponsored two region-wide conferences to help focus public attention on the problems facing the lagoon and the urgent need for action. As a result of the first conference, held in 2003, a

multi-agency scientific task force was formed to study links between outbreaks of disease in lagoon species, seek funding to address priority threats, and promote ongoing coordinated research and monitoring of lagoon health.

Our restoration scientists are also addressing the problems of invasive species in the region. A 20-year effort to remove invasive, non-native plants and replant with native coastal species has restored approximately 47 acres at the Conservancy's Blowing Rocks Preserve in Hobe Sound. Sharing lessons learned through this project, the Conservancy is partnering with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Florida State Park Service and Marine Resources Council to share staff, volunteers and equipment needed to remove invasive, non-native plants throughout the south Indian River Lagoon region.

Future Goals

The Conservancy will continue to protect important lands along the lagoon. We will develop and share invasive, non-native plant removal and habitat restoration techniques with other land managers, and will

continue to work with local, state and federal agencies on land acquisition and management to improve water quality.

With the support of concerned individuals, foundations and corporations, we can ensure a bright future for the Indian River Lagoon. For information about how you can help, contact the Conservancy's Indian River Lagoon Program Office at (321) 956-7711 or the Florida Chapter's Philanthropy Office at (407) 682-3664.

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The mission of The Nature Conservancy is to preserve the plants, animals and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive.