

# Restrictions on boaters proposed to protect Everglades seagrass

May 18 2009, By David Fleshler

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Concerned that powerboats are tearing up seagrass in Florida Bay, Everglades National Park has proposed a range of possible restrictions on boaters to protect a vast, shallow estuary that supports sea turtles, fish and clouds of wading birds.

The proposals have generated deep concern among South Florida's huge recreational fishing community, where many people worry that the most drastic of the alternatives could shut them out of most of the bay and hurt the tourist industry. But park officials say boats have carved at least 325 miles of scars in the bay, with the damage accelerating in an era of bigger boats, more powerful engines and tough, stainless-steel propellers that allow boaters to penetrate shallow, difficult-to-navigate areas.

"People have just lost a lot of fear," said David King, the park's Florida Bay District ranger. "They just feel they can power over whatever they come across. Florida Bay has the potential to be one of the phenomenal natural areas of the world. It's not that today. It's been beat up."

In the forest-green carpet of seagrass along the bay bottom, light-green streaks indicate areas where propellers have stripped bare the vegetation that provides most of the bay's energy. Seagrass provides food for [fish](#), manatees and sea turtles, and serves as a nursery and hunting grounds for marine creatures.

All the park's proposals include mandatory permits and boater education, but they vary in how much they would restrict powerboats, with the most

severe creating huge zones in which they could use only push-poles or low-speed electric motors. The park expects to announce a preferred alternative this fall and implement the plan in 2011.

More than 200 people, mostly boaters and guides, attended a park meeting at the International Game Fish Association in Dania Beach. Some opposed any new restrictions; others agreed there's a problem but urged the park to choose the most surgical alternative that would maintain access to most of the bay. And several speakers said the whole idea of restricted areas, designated trails and no-motor zones would impose an unpleasant bureaucratic grid over a vast wild area.

"It's too much regulation," said Jupiter, Fla., resident Tracy Bennett, a member of the venerable West Palm Beach Fishing Club. "When you get too regimented -- you have to stick to this trail, you can't go here -- it just takes the fun out of it."

Bennett, a retired civil engineer who has been fishing in the park for 35 years, likes to explore remote areas around the fringes, such as Hell's Bay and Whitewater Bays. He uses aerial photographs to navigate the mangrove labyrinths, a "real wilderness experience." In an interview he said he supports the park's Alternative 2, which relies primarily on boater education and would create two small pole-and-troll zones.

Tougher alternatives, he said, would "take out huge areas that boaters have used for a hundred years. The boaters I've talked to don't trust the process. They think the park is taking an extreme position to accommodate the paddlers."

Ted Perron, of Coral Springs, Fla., organizer of the Palm Beach Water Yaks kayaking club, supports the strictest limits on boats but said he doesn't want them gone from the park.

"It's not to exclude the boaters," he said. "It's to protect the Everglades."

Despite its vast expanse, Florida Bay is extremely shallow, with an average depth of 3 feet. It is not unusual to see a heron or egret standing in water hundreds of yards from land. It can be treacherous for boaters.

Capt. Tad Burke, head of the Florida Keys Fishing Guides Association, said the guides have drawn up an alternative that would emphasize a thorough and mandatory education program before boaters could enter Florida Bay, which he called "one of the most difficult bodies of water to navigate." They strongly oppose the creation of huge pole-and-troll zones, which he said would effectively close off much of the bay.

"We want to protect the environment," he said. "But we also want to protect the economic value of Everglades National Park. How can you close off massive areas of the park?"

But he gave the park's leadership credit for taking the boaters' concerns seriously. "They get it," he said. "They've actually been listening."

Environmental groups generally support the tougher restrictions, arguing that the park's first duty is to protect natural resources.

"No one likes more regulations, but the boating traffic has gone up two and a half times in the last 30 years," said Brian Scherf of the Florida Biodiversity Project. "These seagrass areas are so important for juvenile fish habitat, food supply, hunting grounds for other fish. If you don't have healthy seagrass, you won't have great fishing."

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