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## Editorial I River restoration, eelgrass planting keeps Citrus manatees thriving

May 17, 2021

### INNOVATIVE INITIATIVES

**THE ISSUE:** *Restoration projects begin on Homosassa River, King's Bay.*

**OUR OPINION:** *Dredging, eelgrass planting improves water quality, manatee health.*

Citrus County has some of the healthiest manatees in the world, and that is no happenstance.

News headlines across the state outline manatee populations in peril, but in Citrus, the West Indian manatee is thriving.

While the local manatee population was in danger in the past, it has rebounded, in great part thanks to the bay restoration efforts of Save Crystal River (SCR).

The grassroots group vacuum dredges local waterways and plants the sandy river bottoms with natural eelgrass, a food staple for the manatee.

Neighboring organization Homosassa River Restoration Project Inc. (HRRP) also aims to clean up waterways on the west side where manatees inhabit, and the two entities recently started a new series of restoration efforts along King's Bay and the Homosassa River.

The spring cleaning began April 1, with Winter Garden-based Contractor Sea & Shoreline employing 45 workers and divers to handle operations at the two restoration sites.

These efforts are proving to be a wildly successful in our community, and should be considered best practices and a model for other manatee-laden counties across the state.

Citrus is a leader in this effort.

Replanting eelgrass is critical to our future, and there is solid proof that it is viable.

Kudos to Commissioner Ruthie Schlabach, Rep. Ralph Massullo, R-Lecanto, and Senate President Wilton Simpson for building the relationships that helped to secure legislative support for the latest phases of the SCR project.

Florida senators and representatives voted this legislative session to appropriate \$4 million toward the King's Bay Restoration Project.

In the 2020 session, state lawmakers allocated \$1.5 million to launch the HRRP, which was additional to a \$2 million grant for the initiative.

The native and sustainable eelgrass planting is a wise investment and a good use of taxpayer dollars, because it keeps springs clean, waterways clear and manatee populations in good condition. This greatly enhances local tourism, and thusly the Citrus economy.

Without a doubt, seagrass is saving manatee lives. Annual assessment data from the U.S. Geological Survey shows that the dredging and eelgrass planting is successfully creating a reliable food source for manatees. The projects are a proven success and merit continued support.

Overall, SCR and HRRP are representative of a great team effort between local and state official, and public volunteers, to enhance the environment.

Acres upon acres of Citrus' west coast waterways are being restored to pristine conditions, and tens of thousands of eelgrass plants are effectively keeping manatees well-fed and healthy.

These cleanup processes are a solution for Florida's troubled waters, and other counties should utilize the Citrus model as soon as possible to save manatee lives.