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## Editorial | State officials tour waterways under restoration

Aug 27, 2022

### **THE ISSUE:**

*Officials indicate continued support for waterways renewal.*

### **OUR OPINION:**

*The state should support these projects as a template for environment improvement.*

It's been seven years since the nonprofit group Save Crystal River (SCR) began environmental restoration in King's Bay. Mirroring their efforts, a Homosassa-based organization began knocking on doors in Tallahassee in 2017 looking for funding to address the mess at the headsprings of the Homosassa River. Both nonprofits' efforts were rewarded, and state officials took a tour of each waterway on Aug. 11 to view the progress that has occurred.

Senate President Wilton Simpson and Rep. Dr. Ralph Massullo were accompanied by Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) Secretary Shawn Hamilton. They saw the results of the sweat equity spent finding money to address the environmental disaster that King's Bay and the Homosassa River had become. Nasty algae had put a stranglehold on these waters, destroying the clarity that many old-timers remember from decades past.

FDEP and the legislature began providing funding in 2015, and so far, SCR has received \$37 million and the Homosassa River Restoration Project (HRRP) about \$9.5 million. Both have utilized Sea & Shoreline, an environmental restoration company, to help repair areas damaged by, among other things, fertilizer runoff and septic tanks leaching “nutrients” into the waterways.

Sea & Shoreline essentially vacuums the riverbeds and restocks thousands of eelgrass plants underwater. Many of the plants are surrounded by cages to protect them from manatees munching them while they grow their rootstock.

SCR has fostered the cleaning of 65 acres of King’s Bay. Similarly, the HRRP began working with Sea & Shoreline in 2019 and has cleaned 13.5 acres at the headsprings of the Homosassa River. Together, both waterways have seen the removal of hundreds of millions of pounds of nasty algae. Eelgrass numbering in the hundreds of thousands of plants has been imbedded. More than 800 spring vents have also been reopened. Both projects are continuing, though funding is an issue for the HRRP. Simpson and Dr. Massullo said they are working to find money to support the project until next year’s legislature convenes.

Both expressed their enthusiasm when they took a tour by boat. Dr. Massullo said he saw “a river bottom that is extremely conducive to the hardy seagrass,” noting it “can grow a few feet high in the summer and then survive the manatees feeding in the winter months.”

However, there was some concern as they saw the destruction of some of the recently planted eelgrass that had been uprooted by dragging anchors thrown out by careless boaters. They urged the public to be more environmentally conscious.

Dr. Massullo said he, Simpson, and Hamilton concur that they saw many areas that needed to be addressed and said that “expansion of the project could serve as a model to the entire state.” Simpson agreed, stating, “Our springs are an important part of Florida’s past, present, and future.”

Dr. Massullo summed it up clearly when he observed, “Our rivers are being restored, our springs and vents are having increased flow and our beautiful area can be enjoyed and protected by our citizens using best boating practices and careful non-damaging anchoring techniques” while the eelgrass is in its infancy on the way to adulthood.

We agree with their observations. These citizen-led projects are indeed a model of how public funding and private leadership can work together to repair decades of damage, disrepair, and neglect. This, no doubt, is an environmental win-win.