

Some Things Change and Some Remain the Same

A rewrite from 30 years ago

Pine Island Aquatic Preserve

Pine Island Sound is a 23 mile-long estuary in south-west Florida that plays an important role in the colorful past and contributes greatly to the present-day appeal of the surrounding area. Virtually all the waters of the sound are part of the Pine Island Sound Aquatic Preserve, established by the Florida Legislature in 1978. Aquatic preserve are state-owned submerged lands of exceptional aesthetic, biological, or scientific value that are to be preserved in a natural condition for the enjoyment of the future generations. The preserve backs the renowned Cayo Costa/Captiva/Sanibel Island Chain and provides irreplaceable nursery grounds for a sizable portion of Florida's west coast fisheries. For those and other reasons, the protection of these waters is critical in maintaining the unique quality of life in the area.

Natural Resources

The Aquatic preserve encompasses over 54,000 acres of submerged land and water, entirely contained within Lee County. The preserve is bordered by Charlotte Harbor proper on the North; San Carlos Bay on the South; Pine Island on the East; and the barrier island chain of Cayo Costa, North Captiva, Captiva and Sanibel on the west. Like most barrier islands, the configuration of these is extremely changeable. Blind Pass, separating Captiva and Sanibel islands, has closed and opened at least six times between 1859 and 1961. Captiva and North Captiva have become separate islands only recently when Redfish Pass was cut by a hurricane in 1921.

The connection to the Gulf of Mexico enables Pine Island Sound to act as a nursery ground for numerous marine fish and shellfish. The great majority of the commercially important species in Florida must spend some part of their lives in an estuary. The shadow, protected sound contains a mixture of fresh and salt water highly suited to the growth of estuarine plants, which in turn provide food and shelter for countless animals. In Pine Island Sound, the great biological productivity depends largely on the mangroves and seagrass plant communities. Most of the plants material is used by animals through a detritus-based food web, that is, one based on decomposing plant matter.

The osprey, which nest in many locations in the preserve, is a good example of how food web functions in the estuary. One osprey, for example, might eat a sea trout, which had just eaten several pink shrimp. Pink shrimp fed on smaller crustaceans such as amphipods, which turn feed on the microorganism involved in the decay of seagrass and mangroves leaves. This is just one strand of the complex food web, which ultimately starts with estuarine plants. Loss of production for the plants, such as excessive mangrove trimming, water pollution and boat propeller cut in the seagrass beds, will inevitably affect higher organisms, including humans. Aquatic preserve management strives to protect plant habitat and water quality and thus preserve the very basis of the estuary's biological abundance.

The Past and Present

Since before recorded history, the bounty of Pine Island Sound has attracted people to its shores. For over 10,000 years, the abundant fish and shellfish were the mainstay of the diet of Native Americans dwelling around the sound. As a result of the plentiful food resources, the native inhabitants of the area, the



Calusa, had achieved greater social and political complexity by the sixteenth century than most other hunter and gatherer cultures. During the next two hundred year, however, the Calusa were extirpated by war and disease associated with the arrival of the Europeans. Thus the fishery resources of the sound were eventually transferred to Spanish fishermen.

These fishermen were the main inhabitants of the area until the early 1880's, when Florida became part of the United States and new laws were being passed to drive out the Spanish. Early American settlers to the Pine Island Sound area were few: the population of Pine Island was still less than 200 in the 1930's. While growth has remained remarkably slow on Pine Island, population pressures on the west side of the sound have increased much more dramatically. From North Captiva to Sanibel Island, the influx of tourists and residents threatens the very qualities that initially attracted them to the islands. The role of the aquatic preserve is to maintain or enhance these valuable waters so that their productivity and beauty will be preserved.

Recreational Opportunities

Pine Island Sound Aquatic Preserve lies next to some of the most popular and beautiful parks and beaches in Florida. Cayo Costa State Park covers most of the island and is accessible by boat and private ferry services from Pineland and Punta Gorda. The ferry from Pineland also provides tours of the northern portion of the preserve. The J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island is the largest and most visited, with well over one-half million visitors in 1987. Several public boat ramps and fishing spots lie within or near the preserve. Several private marinas on the sound provide services including boat rental, fuel, food, berthing, and pump-out facilities. Nature study and shelling, famous on Sanibel's gulf beaches, are also excellent activities to enjoy on the sound side of the barrier islands.



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