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Contact: Rachel Arndt, 727-867-8166 x233
rarndt@tampabaywatch.org

Collaborative Long-term Solutions Needed to Restore Shell Key Pass

Tierra Verde, FL – At one time it was thousands of feet across, now the Northern Pass into the Shell Key Preserve has closed. Tampa Bay Watch is concerned with the serious and long term impacts to our natural resources that will occur if the Pass is not reopened and water circulation restored. A multi-partner approach is needed for a long term solution to this problem. Shell Key is an ecological treasure that needs to be protected and restored for future generations to appreciate.

“As the northern pass closes, water circulation is dramatically reduced, if not eliminated, to the northern half of the Preserve,” says Peter Clark, President of Tampa Bay Watch. “Water flow and biological access now must come from the southern Bunces Pass area, which greatly reduces flushing of the area.”

Problems associated with the closure of the Pass include the reduction of water quality, deterioration of critical seagrass communities, loss of habitat for commercially and recreationally important fish, negative impacts to bird and other wildlife habitat and restricted recreational usage. A permanent solution to the problem is needed to reopen and maintain the northern pass into Shell Key Preserve. A hydrological analysis of the northern Shell Key area needs to occur to evaluate construction alternatives.

Local homeowners are also concerned about the closure of the pass. “It’s the murkiest water that I have seen at my dock in sixteen years since the pass is closed and there is no longer flow,” states Patrick Walsh. Additionally, Bo Godbold who also lives next to Shell Key Preserve recently witnessed two manatees that almost got grounded due to the closure of the pass, “I do worry as the dolphin and manatees no longer have access to open water”.

The Shell Key Preserve is a 1,800-acre ecological preserve located immediately south of Pass-a-Grille Beach and St. Pete Beach, It was established to protect sensitive marine habitats and includes one of the county's largest undeveloped barrier islands (Shell Key) as well as numerous mangrove islands and expansive seagrass beds. Shell Key has been designated as one of the state's most important areas for shorebird nesting and wintering and it serves as an important study area for these species. It also is an important area for recreation. The Shell Key Preserve is managed by Pinellas County.

Tampa Bay Watch is a nonprofit 501 (c)(3) stewardship program dedicated exclusively to the charitable and scientific purpose of protecting and restoring the marine and wetland environments of the Tampa Bay estuary encompassing over 400 square miles of open water and 2,300 square miles of highly- developed watershed. Tampa Bay Watch involves more than 10,000 youth and adult volunteers each year in hands on habitat restoration projects. For more information, visit www.tampabaywatch.org, or call 727-867-8166.

Photo Opportunity: Peter Clark, President of Tampa Bay Watch is available to take media via boat to Shell Key Preserve. Contact Rachel Arndt at (727) 867-8166 x233 or rarndt@tampabaywatch.org to schedule a time.