

Charlotte Harbor is surrounded, thankfully!

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One of the great features of living near the Charlotte Harbor estuary is the abundance of green space surrounding us. Unfortunately, the wide array of terms and acronyms used to describe the various managed areas can be confusing. This article attempts to decode some of these terms. (Editor's note: Examples are those near Charlotte Harbor. Many other fantastic sites can be found throughout the CHNEP watershed.)

Aquatic Preserves — Virtually all of the waters of Charlotte Harbor, which I regularly sail, kayak and cruise over, are designated aquatic preserves. The 1975 Florida Aquatic Preserves Act enabled the designation of sensitive waterways as protected areas. The aquatic preserves in the Charlotte Harbor Estuary are Gasparilla-Charlotte Harbor, Cape Haze, Matlacha Pass, Pine Island Sound, Lemon Bay and Estero Bay. The Florida Coastal Office (FCO) of the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has responsibility for the aquatic preserves.

State Parks — Just as most of the water in Charlotte Harbor is protected by the state, so too is much of the shore around it to serve as a buffer as the 42,500-acre Charlotte Harbor Preserve State Park. Also part of the Florida State Parks system are Cayo Costa, Don Pedro, Gasparilla Island and Stump Pass. These and the other parks within the watershed are managed by the Division of Parks & Recreation of the Florida DEP.

Wildlife Management Areas — East of Charlotte Harbor is the Fred C. Babcock/Cecil M. Webb Wildlife Management Area (Babcock-Webb WMA), which includes the Yucca Pen Unit. Together they cover more than 80,000 acres. One of the objectives of WMAs is to sustain the widest possible range of native wildlife in their natural habitats while allowing controlled hunting. These lands are more rugged than parks and have fewer developed amenities. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) manages the WMAs and the Wildlife Environmental Areas (WEA), which have more of an emphasis on protecting endangered species.

FWC also manages a number of Critical Wildlife Areas (CWA), such as Little Estero Island and a small island in the Myakka River critical to wood stork breeding.

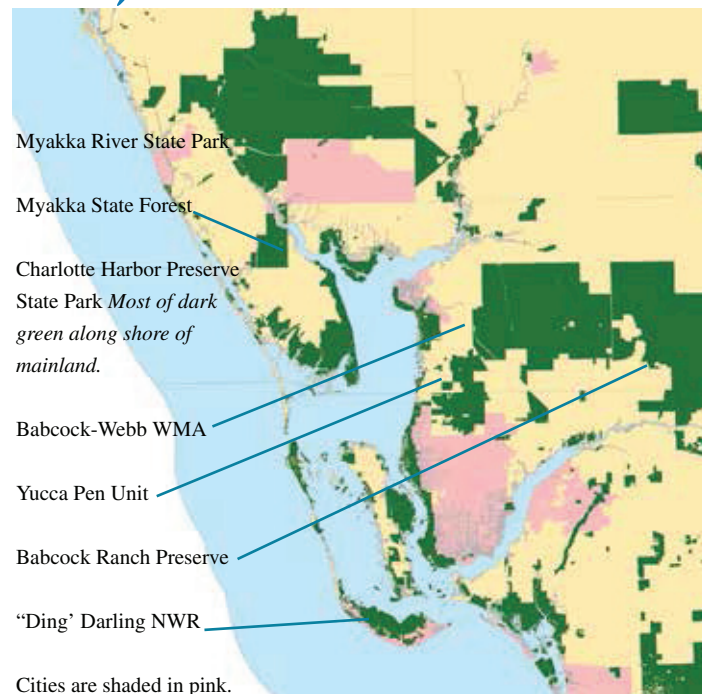
State Forests — The Florida Forest Service of the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services guides the operation of the Florida State Forests network. The primary mission of the Forest Service is to protect and maintain the biological diversity of the many ecosystems found in and around the state forests, while integrating public use of the resources, including hunting. The two primary state forests in the Charlotte Harbor area are the Myakka State Forest and the Peace River State Forest.

In 2006, the State of Florida and Lee County purchased 73,239 acres of the former Babcock Crescent B Ranch located east of the Babcock-Webb WMA. The Lee County section is now named the Bob Janes Preserve and the Charlotte County section the Babcock Ranch Preserve. Beginning in 2016, responsibility for management of BRP will be assumed by the Florida Forest Service in cooperation with FWC.

Reserves — East of the Peace River State Forest is the Southwest Florida Water Management District's R.V. Griffin Reserve and the Peace River Reservoir, a water supply operated by the Peace River Manasota Regional Water Supply Authority serving four counties.

National Wildlife Refuges — The U.S. Department of the Interior through the National Wildlife Refuge System has a number of holdings in southwest Florida. The J. N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge Complex includes "Ding" Darling NWR on Sanibel, Pine Island NWR, Caloosahatchee NWR, Matlacha Pass NWR and Island Bay NWR.

County Preserves, Reserves and Environmental Parks — All the counties in the Charlotte Harbor watershed own and manage conservation land. Preserves are generally larger environmental parcels with less urban interface than parks.



City Parks — Many cities also support local recreational, ecological, conservation and environmental parks, many located along the waterfront.

Land Trusts, Conservancies and Foundations — In addition to the various public initiatives, there are many other private groups providing leadership and initiating conservation land acquisitions. The Calusa Land Trust and Nature Preserve of Pine Island, Inc., the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation (SCCF), the Lemon Bay Conservancy, the Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast and others all help by acquiring, managing and preserving in perpetuity environmentally sensitive or historically important land.

Conclusion: Conservation of land is a big and essential undertaking in southwest Florida, no matter how the protected land is described. Virtually all levels of government and many not-for-profit organizations are involved. Facilitating positive communication among all these well-meaning groups and the public is just one of the important functions of the CHNEP.

Graham Segger spends his winters in Burnt Store Marina and his summers sailing on the Great Lakes. This article is abridged from a personal interest study he has done of the conservation lands near Charlotte Harbor.

Learn more by attending the CHNEP Conservation Lands Workshop (page 14) and visit the online CHNEP Special Places map (page 13) to learn about public access to these sites.