

Scallop Survey Results

By **Betty Staugler**

Water LIFE / Sea Grant

On August 14th, 126 citizen-scientists participated in the 2nd *Great Bay & Sound Scallop Search* in Charlotte County. The search is a way of assessing bay scallop distribution and trends in abundance over time in local waters. The Charlotte County event was the first of four volunteer based scallop searches scheduled in southwest Florida. The others occurring in Sarasota Bay (August 21st), Tampa Bay (August 28th) and Pine Island Sound (August 28th).

Volunteers who participated in the search attended a required training session where they received monitoring gear and instructions on how and where to sample. The methods we use are designed to provide uniform data that can be used to compare different areas of the bay, different areas of southwest Florida (Tampa to Pine Island Sound) and one year to the next.

A total of 36 teams went out in the Charlotte event. That comprised 32 boats and four groups of kayakers. Each team was assigned an area to sample. Sites ranged from just north of the Tom Adams Bridge down to Boca Grande and then east to Turtle Bay.

This year's event documented 163 live scallops during the search, an increase over the 94 observed in 2009. Although these numbers are still low, the increase is a positive sign for our area. Unfortunately, bay scallop search results in Sarasota Bay were less than encouraging this year. They counted 15 live scallops during their search this year, down from 180 in 2009 and almost 900 in 2008.

We monitor bay scallops in southwest Florida because they are an important species to both humans and the environment. When coastal waters are able to

support bay scallops it is a sign of reasonably good water quality conditions. Many volunteers participating in the Sarasota and Charlotte searches this year commented about how healthy the seagrass looked. Healthy seagrass is important habitat for bay scallops, but obviously that alone is not enough (as indicated by the low Sarasota Bay count).

Bay scallops are also monitored throughout the year by counting spat (a larval phase when scallops first settle on seagrass blades). If you see yellow and red floats together, chances are you are looking at a spat collector. Spat is monitored from St. Joe's Bay to Pine Island Sound, with twelve sites in coastal Charlotte County. Eleven volunteers in Charlotte County are also monitoring scallops at their docks in cages. The caged scallops are part of a community restoration program where bay scallops are placed in areas to spawn, thus adding additional recruitment potential. Monthly, volunteers who have adopted the cages, collect data on their scallops. We use this information to determine the percent of survival and growth rate of the scallops.

The results of these combined monitoring programs provide resource managers with information needed to effectively manage and hopefully restore bay scallop populations. Bay scallops are extremely sensitive organisms and so short lived that their success depends upon large populations in large areas over a long enough time period to ensure one red tide event or one rainy year will not result in a collapse of this species. Hopefully, someday we will see a sustainable bay scallop population in southwest Florida. Until then, it's nice to know there are a few happy ones out there.

Betty Staugler is the Florida Sea Grant Agent for Charlotte County. She can be reached at 941.764.4346. Sea Grant is a University of Florida IFAS program.



Judy Ott (brown flippers) and Tracey Hawk (pink flippers) scour the bottom of Gasparilla Sound looking for scallops last month.

Below: A local scallop found near Sandfly Key. One of several found there.



LEE COUNTY RESULTS

Before the mid 1960s, Pine Island Sound supported a healthy bay scallop population, which, in turn, supported a million-dollar commercial scallop industry, but as Florida's human population and coastal development increased water quality declined, and scallop populations crashed along the Gulf Coast.

Since then, restoration projects have helped bay scallops come back in some areas.

Pine Island Sound responded to the first restoration effort in 2003 - it was the best area in the state for scallops two years later. Then after red tides in 2005 and 2006 the scallop population in 2007 and 2008 was zero or near zero. But they came back quick.

Last month, Lee County volunteers counted 335 scallops in Pine Island Sound, compared with 163 from Charlotte County, 32 from Tampa Bay and 15 from Sarasota County.

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