

Lake Jackson Shoreline Restoration Project is complete

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On August 27, 2009, a group of volunteers got together and planted native bulrush along the southwestern shoreline of Lake Jackson. This brought the Lake Jackson Shoreline Restoration Project to completion. The project included removing about 50 percent of the area's overgrown vegetation, a 4 inch scrape of the soil in cleared areas, herbicide treatments and planting of desirable, native vegetation. Since the project's beginning in 2007, there has been a noticeable increase in user activity by anglers and nature enthusiasts, as well as a major spike in wading bird activity.

Lake Jackson is a 3400 acre lake in Sebring. It is considered the centerpiece of Highlands County. It has more than 10 miles of shoreline and only 2 of those are uninhabited. This area of shoreline had been relatively unmanaged for many years, and at the mercy of a widely fluctuating lake level. The result had become an extremely thick monoculture of Primrose and Willow, causing decreased bird activity, suppression of the native seed bank, and reduced aesthetics.

In an effort to revitalize the shoreline, the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District and Highlands County lake management staff designed a plan in 2007 to restore native vegetation and littoral zone function to a 1.2 mile stretch of the lake's shoreline. Staff secured funding for the project from 5 entities, including Highlands County's Tourist Development Council, Recreation and Parks Advisory Commission, the City of Sebring, the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District and the Florida Lake Management Society: Love Your Lake Grant Program.

During the project, about half of the area's overgrown vegetation was removed. The other half was left to provide food, protection and bird roosting habitat. Herbicide was applied to the areas where the plants were removed to keep the re-growth of these undesired species to a minimum. Once the vegetation was removed, staff was able to identify the major sources of nutrient loading which had been the fueling of the growth of primrose, cattail and other undesired plant species.

Once water levels of the lake rose, analysis of the water quality was done. The data gathered from these tests showed that the lagoons in the restoration area were filtering many of the nutrients from the storm water and seepage before they entered the lake.

With the scraping of the soil in the areas of vegetation removal, a native seed bank was exposed and the result was that many rushes, cordgrass, buttonbush, pickerelweed, saggitaria and other desirable and beneficial species of plants began to spring up. The native planting in the area also increased the diversity and aesthetics. Vegetation, such as the bulrush that was planted along the shoreline, is thriving and providing much needed habitat to the animals that reside there.

Throughout the 2 year project, countless volunteers, staff and partners have helped to make it the success that it is. The data and observations that have been acquired will be used to implement

similar projects in other areas of the county. A long-term management plan has been drafted and will be of great help to the City of Sebring as they assume the future responsibilities of the site.

Thanks to all of our partners who helped fund the project and to all of those who came out and planted vegetation on the site. It has truly been a team effort and we at Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District are so grateful to all who assisted. Many rewarding experiences were born from this project. Today, while driving along Highway 27, one can look out and see unobstructed, the beautiful lake, native vegetation and all the wading birds that inhabit the area.