

Successful partnerships help get the job done.

By: Corine Burgess

Did you ever wonder how scientists know what's at the bottom of our local lakes? Most people may not even think about such things, but it is an interesting process and I thought I would share it with you.

Recently, Erin McCarta, Lakes Management Assistant and I joined with staff from the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) and did a "submerged aquatic vegetation" (SAV) survey on Lake Istokpoga. SAV sounds kind of technical, but other than mapping out quadrants and using a GPS unit, its mostly physical labor.

The way it works is really quite simple. Quadrants, spaced 500 feet apart, are mapped out over the entire area of the lake. A boat and a GPS unit are utilized to find the spots on the lake that have been previously mapped. Once the spot is located, the boat is stopped, a tool comprised of two garden rakes enclosed in two long PVC pipes joined together is used to reach down to the bottom of the lake and bring up a sample of the sediment and vegetation. This sophisticated tool measures approximately one square meter of area.

While one person checks the bottom of the lake, another uses an instrument called a Secchi Disk to measure water clarity. The Secchi is a round disk that measures 8 inches in diameter. It is black and white in color and attached to a measuring tape or pole. The process is to lower the disk into the water until it is no longer visible and then take the depth measurement. It's a very simple process that gives us the data needed for water clarity measurements.

Generally these SAV surveys are done with a crew of three people per boat. The third person usually records all the data.

Erin and I, representing Highlands County Lakes Management Program, have partnered with the SFWMD for two years in a row in an effort to help them compile this much needed data. Not only is this a great partnership between governmental agencies, but it gives us experience and knowledge about new technologies and allows opportunities for networking and exchanging of ideas.

SAV mapping is done on Lake Istokpoga and Lake Okeechobee by the SFWMD. Having been a part of the process, it gives us a great appreciation of what these folks do on a daily basis. Although field work may be exciting, it has its challenges. The work can be somewhat tedious and the weather is always a factor. Heat, mosquitoes, snakes, technical malfunctions, and rough water may all be a part of a normal work day.

Erin and I appreciate the opportunity to share in these surveys. Working side by side with other agencies in an effort to help each other achieve goals is a win win. Especially in these days of budget cuts, shortage of staff and money to get the job done, partnerships are more important than ever.

As county employees with the Natural Resources Department, we partner with many other agencies in an effort to continue in the mission to conserve our natural resources. Because we are provided to the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District (HSWCD) to assist them in accomplishing their goals, they are our closest partner and often fund cost share portions of grants, projects and many other programs in which we could not participate without their assistance. Further, because of this partnership, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, with whom we share office space, provides us with vehicles, computers, staff and technical advice. Funds are administered through this office from the Florida Department of Agriculture for the best management practices that agricultural land owners are utilizing in order to be in compliance with the Department of Environmental Protection. Without this partnership, none of this would be possible. In addition, agencies such as the Southwest Florida Water Management District have partnered with us in countless projects and funded numerous grants. Our list of partnerships is lengthy and diverse.

Partnerships are not a new concept, but they should be used more often. Partnering with other agencies saves taxpayer dollars, gets the job done, helps bridge gaps that might otherwise widen, offers opportunities for the exchange of ideas, helps to not recreate the wheel and nourishes good relationships. The current challenges we all face as citizens of this country could benefit greatly from successful partnerships at every level of government, business and community.