Recreational use of the Intracoastal occurs in many different forms. In addition to the boating activities that occur within the waterway (both motorized and non-motorized), the waterway and its environs attract other users that fish, swim, wade, snorkel, waterski, use personal watercraft, and simply walk along the water’s edge. While most of these non-boating activities occur outside the Intracoastal boundaries, they nonetheless are associated with the Intracoastal due to their proximity to the waterway.

The Intracoastal includes a variety of settings for recreational activities, including both natural and man-made areas, in-water locations as well as upland. Today’s Intracoastal exists as a man-made channel that traverses a series of natural water bodies, expanding the role of the waterway for eco-tourism and nature-based recreation. Therefore, the broad recreational usage of the waterway includes pedestrians strolling along the shoreline on wooden riverwalks as well as kayakers seeking access to environmental preserve areas along the waterway or venturing to spoil islands enhanced with native vegetation and oyster habitat.

Charrette participants were enthusiastic about the expansion of recreational activities in and along the ICW, placing particular emphasis on eco-tourism and nature-based recreation as areas for future program development and investment. Spoil islands, their restoration, and increased access for recreational users emerged as a strong point of consensus, with the successful Peanut Island and Snook Island projects as highlighted examples. In addition to discussion of these issues, this chapter also provides key findings and recommendations. Readers should also refer to Chapters IV (Public Access) and V (Protection of Natural Resources) for additional discussion of these issues.
In addition to the movement of freight, recreational activity along the Intracoastal is perhaps the most visible use of the waterway. Recreational activity takes many forms, including both motorized and non-motorized watercraft; personal watercraft; and individual use of the water by anglers, swimmers, waders, and sightseers. Recreational activity occurs in all types of environments, both man-made and natural, on the water as well as on land. By contrast, eco-tourism activities occur by definition in natural areas characterized by significant natural beauty or biodiversity. While most forms of eco-tourism can be defined as recreation, not all forms of recreation can be classified as eco-tourism. The Intracoastal itself is a man-made channel that was dug through a series of natural water bodies, providing access to eco-tourism destinations. During the charrette, participants emphasized a desire to expand both forms of activity on and along the Intracoastal. Recreational facilities are discussed at great length in Chapter IV (Public Access); therefore, this chapter focuses more generally on eco-tourism, including ecotourism destinations, appropriate recreational activities related to eco-tourism, and related recommendations. Additional details regarding eco-tourism are also contained in Chapter V (Protection of Natural Resources).

For the purposes of this report, “eco-tourism” is generally defined as a form of tourism in undisturbed areas with strong natural beauty or biodiversity that strives to minimize ecological impact or damage. Charrette participants were highly enthusiastic about the concept of eco-tourism, wanting to promote eco-tourism as a way to diversify the economy, expand public access to the ICW, and educate the public about the County’s natural resources.

The distinction between natural areas and man-made ones is set forth in the introduction to this chapter. Much interest was focused on spoil islands, like Peanut Island, as well as restoration projects like Snook Island. Although these facilities are man-made and technically may not fit into the definition of “eco-

Palm Beach County’s Convention and Visitor’s Bureau has already recognized the importance of eco-tourism, publishing a brochure that highlights eco-tourism and recreational amenities in the County (cover image above). tourism,” islands such as these can become important and contributing components of the natural environment if enhanced to support native species and the well-being of a natural system. In the eyes of the general public, man-made spoil islands with proper vegetation and detailing are attractive destinations for fishing, hiking, swimming, and canoeing/kayaking in a manner that celebrates their biodiversity, whether it is emerging with new plantings or has been established over decades. For the
purposes of this report, eco-tourism will be used to include both naturally occurring features and as well as features that are and could be brought up to a standard to support native biodiversity and enhance natural systems.

Importance of Eco-tourism

Eco-tourism provides benefits to many different types of users and entities. Providing enhanced opportunities to enjoy and celebrate natural environments is a quality of life consideration for many residents and visitors to Palm Beach County. This access must be balanced such that the human appreciation of these systems does not overwhelm them. Eco-oriented visitors can augment the County’s ongoing tourism efforts, diversifying the local economic base by utilizing existing resources to attract visitor dollars. Educational efforts can easily be integrated into eco-tourism programs and settings, creating stewards and advocates with a broader knowledge base to further protection and enhancement activities. Building on national and international trends, environmentally-sensitive “green” technologies and industries in the County can complement eco-tourism development by providing hospitality, goods, and services that correspond to the mindset of these visitors. The combination of these approaches, with adequate balance and progressive planning, can enable Palm Beach County’s portion of the Intracoastal to become a unique destination within the State.

Eco-tourism has less impact on a site with activities...
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such as camping, fishing, swimming, and observing. The facilities are generally designed minimize ecological impacts. In contrast, non-eco-tourism activities can create more impacts such as jet skiing destroying seagrasses, wakes created by fast boats with water skiers or hydro-sliders, or inappropriate intrusion into environmentally sensitive areas.

The Intracoastal provides access to a number of interesting eco-tourism sites. Many of the upland destinations are natural sites that have never been developed. Other sites, particularly spoil islands, have become eco-oriented destinations due to their natural systems, and they are only accessible by water. Most of the sites are publicly owned by various local, state, and federal agencies. The agencies have different rules regarding public access, and access is not permitted on all sites. For example, the USACE which controls Munyon Island does not allow overnight guests on its properties, thereby prohibiting camping activities.

The different sites along the waterway vary in function and features. Shoreline improvements provide erosion control and/or habitat for fisheries, seagrass, and oyster beds. Other inland areas provide stormwater filtering and/or habitat. Not all the sites may be suitable for eco-tourism. The County should work with the various agencies that own the land to identify sites appropriate for eco-tourism, work with the agencies to develop the sites, and help coordinate the efforts for promoting the sites. Wherever possible, appropriate eco-tourism sites should be incorporated with the multistate, state, regional, and local greenways and blueways efforts discussed in the Public Access Chapter.

Spoil Islands

Spoil islands in the ICW emerged in the early 1900s as depositories for dredged materials. Palm Beach County has completed numerous restoration projects on its spoil islands, establishing the county as a regional leader in this regard. A photo array of several County island restoration projects is depicted below. Several of these projects are discussed in this chapter to highlight their eco-tourism potential.

Peanut Island, located in Riviera Beach, is likely the best-known and most popular spoil island in Palm Beach County and perhaps the region. This island was created with dredged materials from the Lake Worth Inlet, which helped propel the Port of Palm Beach into an international shipping port. During the Kennedy presidential administration, bunker facilities were developed on the island, and over time, the
Coast Guard used the island as well. Once public access became possible, visitors began using the island for boating and informal camping.

For nearly two decades, Peanut Island was the subject of potential restoration and enhancement by a variety of entities, including the Riviera Beach Community Redevelopment Agency, the Port of Palm Beach, Palm Beach County, and FIND. Active restoration designs began in the late 1990s, and by the early 2000s, the County’s DERM took the lead in the multi-year, $13 million project. Today, Peanut Island has grown from its original 10-acre footprint to an 80-acre island, offering a natural shoreline for boaters and swimmers, formal camping, snorkeling, volleyball, trails, and a boardwalk. Water taxis provide access to those without boats. The project also restored habitat, adding an environmentally-focused lagoon, oyster habitat off-shore, and native vegetation on the upland. In addition, to continue its important role in navigational assistance, accommodation for

Local kayakers and commercial eco-tourism ventures highlight Peanut Island as a highly desirable destination.

Peanut Island’s inland cove is fed directly from the lagoon, as depicted in the photo above.

Boaters from Palm Beach County and the Region flock to Peanut Island on weekends, especially holiday weekends such as the scene pictured above.
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future dredge materials was maintained on the island as well.

The Peanut Island project has proved to be a successful and popular destination as depicted in the images of the Island’s visitors. This is at least a partial indication of the demand for similar facilities in the area.

Further north in the Lake Worth Lagoon is Munyon Island, a recently completed restoration project. Originally a natural island, Munyon was expanded from 15 to 45 acres, with its wetlands filled with dredged material during the 1930s and 1960s. Wetlands and habitat have been restored with the excess dredge material being used to fill a dredge hole. Munyon Island is a popular destination for canoers, kayakers, and anglers. Initially, it was envisioned with camping facilities, but the USACE will not allow overnight guests.

The Intracoastal Waterway and the natural water bodies that surround it include dozens of natural and spoil islands. To expand the eco-tourism opportunities afforded by these facilities, special efforts should be undertaken to appropriately amenitize these islands when restoration projects are designed. In particular, charrette participants emphasized their desire for camping facilities, staging areas, and educational kiosks. Improvements such as these can be constructed with renewable materials, with light-imprint designs. Multi-stakeholder discussions should be conducted to identify and prioritize these opportunities.

Dredge Hole Restoration

Dredge holes are locations in the ICW where muck and sediment collect yet are too deep for sunlight to penetrate. No vegetation is able to grow in these holes, and therefore, the holes become “dead zones” in the waterway. Dredge holes offer the opportunity for environmental restoration and eco-tourism. Once the sediment can be capped, materials from dredging can be used to fill the hole. Rocks and native vegetation provide suitable habitat for oysters and fisheries. A sampling of dredge holes were inventoried and analyzed as part of the Lake Worth Lagoon restoration project (see map below).

The most recent dredge hole restoration project is Snook Island in Lake Worth. Initially formed by the dredging of fill material for the Lake Worth public golf course, the Snook Island project involved the

Munyon Island: 1992 - 1997

Munyon Island’s five-year restoration timeframe has transformed it into another popular kayak destination.

This map, taken from the Lake Worth Lagoon Dredge Hole Assessment Study, identifies existing dredge holes within the Lagoon that could become candidates for restoration.
filling of these off-shore holes and subsequent creation of islands that provide new habitat in the Lagoon. This $18 million restoration project was completed by the County’s DERM with varied funding including FIND, FDEP, and Palm Beach County. Four mangrove islands and three shoreline mangrove planters were provided, and seagrasses and oyster beds have begun colonization. The mangroves will help prevent shoreline erosion. Current plans include an extension of a riverwalk from the old Lake Worth Bridge to the southernmost island, and charrette participants suggested further interconnections to other islands as well as rustic camping sites and educational kiosks.

Charrette participants encouraged the County to pursue other opportunities for using dredge holes to create eco-tourism opportunities. A strong opportunity for a subsequent restoration effort lies north of Snook Island in West Palm Beach. DERM has already begun design concepts for the South Cove restoration project, which is a highlighted component of West Palm Beach’s marina village. Several dredge holes exist in this area where sand was dredged to help in bridge construction. The plan is to cap the muck accumulated in the holes, fill, add rocks, and plant native vegetation. The beaches would be sandy and would offer eco-destinations for non-motorized vessels.

An expanded recreational role for Snook Island could include pedestrian connections to several islands via boardwalks and rustic camping sites (shown as wooden platforms in this image), several of which could be accessible only by canoe or kayak.

An early glimpse of Snook Island’s formation is evident in the above photo. Challenges with this project have already provided useful lessons for future restoration efforts.
Education as a Part of Eco-tourism

Charrette participants noted the importance of environmental education as a component of eco-tourism. It is an opportunity to educate and create support for environmental efforts. By expanding the understanding of how protecting the natural environment will help protect the built environment and create improved quality of life, advocates and stewards for natural systems can be created.

Educational kiosks should be provided to explain how environmental detriments such as dredge holes and spoil islands became environmental benefits. A system of educational kiosks could be installed in key locations to create a self-guided eco-tour of the ICW.

Sustainable Technology

Charrette participants requested that ICW projects use sustainable and green technologies and designs. In the short-term, this will maximize the potential for eco-tourism and other tourist activity and minimize its impacts. In the long-term, sustainable materials and green technologies tend to produce energy savings as well. Charrette participants strongly emphasized their desire for Palm Beach County to position itself as a leader of sustainable planning and practices, a characteristic that will complement the County’s potential eco-tourism development. Examples discussed during the charrette included renewable materials, rustic camping sites on spoil islands, down-lighting to accomplish “dark skies,” and native landscape materials and xeriscape.
KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Palm Beach County has a number of excellent, on-going programs that are addressing and enhancing eco-tourism and recreational opportunities in and along the Intracoastal. This report recommends continued support for these programs. In addition, the charrette noted the public’s strong desire for expanded eco-tourism amenities in conjunction with habitat restoration and enhancement projects, which may require special inter-agency discussions. Palm Beach County has a wide variety of stakeholder entities interested in eco-tourism, including a growing commercial base of these providers, and efforts should be undertaken to establish a broader dialogue related to this issue. The following specific recommendations are noted:

Support Habitat Restoration and Enhancement Projects

- Continue to support spoil island restoration projects like Peanut Island and Munyon Island to create habitat enhancement, fisheries, and public access where appropriate.
- Continue to support dredge hole restoration projects like Snook Island to create habitat enhancement, fisheries, and public access where appropriate.

Expand Eco-Tourism Amenities in Conjunction with Habitat Restoration and Enhancement Projects

- Initiate inter-agency dialogue with permitting and regulatory entities to explore appropriate camping, staging, public access, and informational amenities to be considered with habitat restoration and enhancement projects, particularly spoil island and dredge hole projects.
- Expand knowledge of light-imprint designs and renewable materials appropriate for environmentally sensitive areas.

Broaden Eco-Tourism Marketing and Promotional Efforts

- Support the on-going eco-tourism efforts of the County’s Convention and Visitors Bureau.
- Develop inventory of eco-oriented commercial vendors in the County.
- Enhance existing public interfaces that provide information regarding eco-tourism destinations, on-going restoration efforts, agency information, and commercial vendors.

Position Palm Beach County as a Leader in Sustainability and Green Technology

- Require eco-tourism improvements be designed for sustainability and constructed with green technologies.

Expand Environmental Education Efforts

- Consider development of an environmental education kiosk series to be established in eco-tourism destinations.