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Big Bend Shellfish Trail dedicated at Cedar Key Seafood Festival



Levy County Visitors Bureau Director Carol McQueen and Aquaculture Extension Agent Leslie Sturmer are joined by other dignitaries in dedicating the Big Bend Shellfish Trail Saturday in Cedar Key. Participating in the ribbon-cutting ceremony are (from left) Levy County Commissioner Mike Joyner, Cedar Key Vice Mayor Sue Colson, Levy County Commissioner Lilly Rooks, Levy County Commission Chairman John Meeks, Levy County School Superintendent Jeff Edison, State Rep. Charlie Stone, McQueen, Mark Dehaven - representing Florida Agriculture Commissioner Adam Putnam, Sturmer, Cedar Key Lions Club President Dale Register and Levy County Sheriff Bobby McCallum.

Story and Photo

By Terry Witt, Senior Staff Writer © Oct. 22, 2017 at 8:27 a.m.

CEDAR KEY -- The Big Bend Region of Florida is home to some of the cleanest freshwater rivers in the United States and the greatest number of shellfish species found anywhere in this country.

In an effort to showcase these abundant resources, the Big Bend Shellfish Trail was created to give visitors and Floridians a map and brochure showcasing the diverse shellfish and aquaculture industries in the Big Bend Region.

On Saturday the Big Bend Shellfish Trail was dedicated by state, county and city officials at the Cedar Key Seafood Festival, an event that takes its name from the very natural resources that make the Big Bend Region of Florida unique.

Native shellfish found in the Big Bend are bay scallops, blue crabs, hard clams, oysters, shrimp and stone crabs. Farm raised clams are also grown in the Big Bend Region. Cedar Key is home to largest farm raised clam industry in Florida.

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The Big Bend Shellfish Trail is aimed at promoting the shellfish and aquaculture industries and the Working Waterfront Communities in coastal Dixie, Levy, Jefferson and Taylor counties.

The trail map provides people with information about:

- Where to locate shellfish vendors, restaurants, seafood markets, marinas, bait and tackle shops and boat ramps.

- When and where recreational harvesting of shellfish is allowable.

- Where to learn about production of clams and oysters.

- How to take an active role in protecting water quality for shellfish.

- Where to find locations that provide opportunities to view and photograph Working Waterfront Communities.

The promotional brochure contains a map of restaurants, seafood markets, marinas and bait and tackle stores in the Big Bend Region and was funded by a \$20,000 grant from The Conservation Fund written by Levy County Visitors Bureau Director Carol McQueen.

The Conservation Fund has worked in all 50 states to protect more than 7.8 million acres of environmentally valuable land since 1985, including 117,000 acres of working forestry, recreational lands, wildlife habitat and cultural resources across Florida.

Clean water from rivers along the coastline of the Big Bend Region is essential to the shellfish industry. Rivers along the Big Bend are the Aucilla, Ecofina, Steinhatchee, Suwannee, Waccasassa and Withlacoochee River. The rivers flush the Big Bend coast with tens of millions of gallons of fresh water daily and provide habitat for the shellfish and other species living along the Gulf Coast.

“The reason shellfish are so abundant in the Big Bend is because of our clean rivers,” McQueen said. “They all feed and create the perfect environment for shellfish.”

She said the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge is the largest undeveloped coastline in the United States. The refuge encompasses about 20 miles of the Suwannee River and the Keys (islands) around Cedar Key. It extends almost to Steinhatchee.

Fresh water from the rivers of the Big Bend provides a clean water environment for the 900,000 acre Big Ben Seagrasses Aquatic Preserve. The underwater grasses serve as the home and nursery for Big Bend shellfish.

The Big Bend Shellfish Trail is the most unique trail of its kind in the United States. Oyster trails can be found in Alabama, Maine and Virginia. There is one clam trail in New Jersey. But nowhere in the nation is there a shellfish trail.

Leslie Sturmer, an aquaculture and shellfish extension specialist for the University of Florida, who helped bring the clam industry to Cedar Key in the 1990's, said the shellfish trail “is just a practical tool that captures the uniqueness of our area and ties it together.”

She said the trail is an effort to increase public awareness of where to eat shellfish like scallops, clams and oysters and at the same time focus attention on a unique aspect of the Big Bend Region's coastal economy.