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Restoration Activities Speed Seagrass Recovery in the Florida Keys

Results of a five-year monitoring effort to repair seagrass damaged in a boat grounding incident suggest that restoration techniques such as replanting seagrass can speed recovery time. The finding is included in a new report released December 16 by NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries.

The National Marine Sanctuaries Conservation Series report, "N-Control Seagrass Restoration Monitoring Report Monitoring Events 2003-2008," presents results of efforts to repair a nearly 1,000-square-foot (92.8-square-meter) swath of seagrass that was damaged on May 29, 2001, when a 45-foot power boat, the N-Control, grounded in Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

Seagrass beds are an important habitat in the sanctuary. They provide nurseries and homes for numerous species of fish and invertebrates and serve as storm surge buffers for the low-lying Florida Keys. However, shallow seagrass beds in the Florida Keys are being damaged by vessel groundings. In 2007, an estimated 217 reported boat groundings occurred in the sanctuary, with approximately 80 percent occurring on seagrass beds. Vessel groundings damage seagrass, leaving barren areas where marine life once flourished.

Restoration techniques at the N-Control grounding site included replanting seagrass and installing stakes for birds to roost on. The use of stakes to attract birds provides a natural way to fertilize seagrass beds as bird feces are high in nutrients needed by the growing seagrass. Among the key findings in the report:

* After five years, the damaged area is gaining seagrass and coral coverage, though it hasn't reached pre-grounding baseline levels.

* Rather than leaving the site to recover on its own, restoration activities have significantly reduced the amount of time required for damaged seagrass beds in the monitoring area to recover.

"This report highlights the critical science needed to understand and restore our sensitive marine habitats," said Sean Morton, superintendent, Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. "It's also an important reminder that boaters need to know where they are going before heading out on the water to prevent groundings in the first place. Make sure you have up-to-date NOAA nautical charts, and always pay attention to the signs, channel markers and informational buoys."

Currently, more than 30 seagrass restoration projects are underway at the sanctuary. Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary protects 2,900 square nautical miles of critical marine habitat, including coral reef, hard bottom, seagrass meadow, mangrove communities and sand flats. NOAA and the state of Florida manage the sanctuary.

The full report can be found online: <http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/science/conservation/ncontrol.html>

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