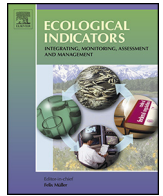


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Preface



South Florida's coastal marine ecosystems have been utilized by humans for centuries for sustenance, recreation and economic gain. However, like many coastal ecosystems around the world we are, in a manner of speaking, "loving them to death." Increasing human populations, overuse of natural resources, and development have had a significant impact on the south Florida landscape, causing the loss of much of the habitat and living resources that make this region a special and valued place.

From 1994 to 2008, NOAA supported a series of multidisciplinary projects to improve the understanding of the causes and consequences of changes being seen in Florida Bay and the human-related risks to the coral reef communities of the Florida Keys. The goal of this research was to understand the changes and provide predictive tools to facilitate management of the downstream impacts of projects implemented under the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan. NOAA-supported work documented the current status and determined the reasons underlying the declines in many aspects of its health. But this research alone was not sufficient to mobilize or empower citizens, agencies, and organizations to protect and restore the aspects of these ecosystems that were valued most by society. And, even if the science was sufficient to undertake management actions, there was not a clear consensus on the specific priorities for protection or restoration – those attributes, or ecosystem services, that society was willing to change behaviors to protect.

Given the confluence of a complex and valued ecosystem in decline and a management landscape not well positioned to address these problems from a regional ecosystem perspective, NOAA provided a funding opportunity targeted at engaging the stakeholders and stewards of these coastal ecosystems. The intent

of the project, later to be called the *Marine and Estuarine Goal Setting for South Florida* (MARES), was to provide the resources needed to facilitate a broad-based and strategic dialog that would lead to a suite of specific and quantitative environmental goals. These goals would identify ecosystem indicators (e.g. submerged aquatic vegetation habitat, fish populations, water clarity, and reduction in algal blooms) that could be measured and crafted into scientifically supportable management plans that could then be pursued to attain the ultimate goal of a south Florida coastal marine ecosystem that is both sustainable and capable of providing the diverse ecological services upon which our society depends. By being inclusive of diverse sectors of society, the hope was that these quantitative goals would have compelling justification and sufficient support to make their implementation feasible over the long time frames that will be needed to reach the goals.

This special volume documents the progress made to date. This is not a process that has a beginning and an end; it is ongoing. MARES was intended to ensure that decisions by society were more transparent and informed; by that measure, it has so far met its intended purpose in the time it has been in existence. At a minimum, it has enabled more informed decision-making, but whether that will result in enhanced protection or restoration of these coastal ecosystems will rest in the hands of those living in south Florida now and well into the future.

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