



Florida Wildlife Federation

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Acquisition and Restoration Council c/o
DEP/DSL Office of Environmental Services
3900 Commonwealth Blvd., MS 100
Tallahassee, FL 32399

April 21, 2021

RE: Commercial Use of Cayo Costa State Park

Dear ARC Members:

It is my understanding that the Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP) has reversed its decision to stop large commercial vessels from landing sightseers along Cayo Costa State Park's southern end. Florida Wildlife Federation became involved with this issue in 2016 when it was brought to our attention that the natural resources of the island were being depleted by large numbers of visitors. Following a lengthy management planning process, DRP wrote the following language into the 2020 plan:

South Dock / Southern Gulf Beach Access

*In 2016, the existing bayside dock located near the south end of Cayo Costa was designated for concession boats. **Visitor use impacts to the natural communities and shorebird/sea turtle nesting habitat have occurred on the beach side of the trail extending from the south dock, indicating the need for closure of this site for facilitated direct public access.** The dock and trail will be maintained for park support purposes only. As permitted in other remote areas of the park, this southern portion of the park will remain accessible for visitors by hiking or other authorized means from the Gulf, such as self-guided boating or paddling. **Reduced visitation at this site is expected to result in gradual recovery of the observed impacts. Due to resource impact concerns (i.e., seagrass beds and mangrove swamp) and poor navigability of the shallow waters along this segment of the island,** alternative locations for a southern concession dock and beach access trail were determined infeasible. As additional parcels are acquired, depth conditions change, and new navigational information becomes available, alternative access points may be evaluated. Concession ferry access will continue to be facilitated through the docks at Pelican Bay.*

As DRP clearly notes the implications of commercial use on this part of the island, please ensure that this activity ceases at this sensitive location. From what we understand, there is no limit on how many people can be dropped off at the existing small dock. Moreover, we have

been informed that seagrass beds in the shallow waters are being negatively affected, turtle nests on the south end are not being protected, shorebird nesting activities are impacted and trespass continues to occur on adjacent private properties. There are also no bathroom facilities on this end of the island.

The existing visitation area at Pelican Bay can handle large groups much more appropriately as the north end of the island is much wider and more resistant to storms. The commercial boats can land the visitors there where they can receive the full park experience, including bathrooms.

Cayo Costa State Park is a beautiful example of the "real Florida." But the island's southern side is the least resilient portion of the park, subject to storm surge and possible breaching. Visitation here should include dispersed private boating, hiking and paddling, so as to protect the resource.

In sum, the Florida Wildlife Federation is opposed to commercial use at the existing southern dock for the reasons stated above. Barrier island ecosystems such as those at Cayo Costa are true gems of the park system and should be protected not only for ourselves and future visitors, but the natural resources that exist there.

Thank you very much for your service to the state and the proper management of our public lands.

Cordially,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Preston T. Robertson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Preston T. Robertson
President and CEO