



Date: May 10, 2021

To: Florida Department of Environmental Protection/Division of Recreation & Parks, Acquisition and Restoration Council

From: John Cassani, Calusa Waterkeeper

Re: Resource damage to Cayo Costa State Park from tour boats

I am writing to voice our organization's concern about a FDEP mismanagement issue occurring at the narrows at the southern part of Cayo Costa State Park.

Calusa Waterkeeper is a licensed member of the Waterkeeper Alliance, an international clean water organization with over 300 Waterkeeper organizations in the US.

Cayo Costa is located in the northwestern corner of our project area which stretches from Lake Okeechobee to Charlotte Harbor.

Cayo Costa State Park is, in my opinion, the most quintessential pristine barrier island in our state. The island has inspired photographers such as Clyde Butcher to document its beauty in some of his iconic Florida images. The park and surrounding waters are important habitat for fish and wildlife. The area east of the island is within the Pine Island Sound Aquatic Preserve, designated as an Outstanding Florida Water and is entitled by rule to the most protection the state of Florida can provide.

Since 2016 the state has been allowing large commercial vessels to cross shallow grass flats to enter the backwaters of Cayo Costa's narrows. The damage done to the resource from the boats and thousands of people per month using this access point has been significant and is increasing.

After more than four years of opposition to the commercial tour boat activity at the narrows, FDEP made the wise decision to stop this activity admitting damages were occurring then suddenly reversed course. Below is the FDEP's statement:

"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."

Historically, Cayo Costa's backwaters behind the narrows were only visited by private boaters and paddlers. Frequent trips by these deeper draft commercial boats, however, are causing damage to the aquatic preserve and littoral areas where the path crosses the island to the Gulf beach. The hydrodynamics of their engines are causing propeller dredging and turbidity that is harmful to the sea beds. All of the aquatic fish and other animals, including the manatee, that are associated with these habitats, are potentially at risk.

If tourism isn't regulated it may irreversibly compromise special places like Cayo Costa. We are seeing this all over the state. The issue at the narrows is clear cut to me. The park has a purpose-built park landing and infrastructure for large groups at the north end which is more appropriate and a safer place for groups. The south beaches historically are used by private boaters and paddlers who causing much less stress to the resources.

We feel FDEP should disallow the commercial activities at the narrows consistent with the earlier version of the Park's Management Plan enabling the resource to recover and prevent further resource damage.