

Section 5: Gasparilla Island State Park and Cayo Costa State Park

Muggy sees the large silvery flashes of a silver king tarpon. Most fish get oxygen from the water through their gills, but tarpon also have a

swim bladder that works like a lung. Like a roller coaster, they move up and down, in and out of the water. When they are out of the water, they can breathe air.

Sometimes water in Charlotte Harbor can be very low in oxygen. Schools of mullet must swim away to survive, but tarpon can stay because they breathe oxygen from the air.

A channel marker guides boats bringing people to Cayo Costa State Park. An anhinga sits on the marker and holds its wings open to dry. It watches Muggy and the school of fish twist in and out of the maze of mangrove roots.

Three brown pelicans skim low across the water. The channel is called Pelican Pass. Boats go through the pass into Pelican Bay, stopping at the docks.

Muggy hears splashing. He watches the feet of a girl and boy wading into the water. He hears the girl say, "Do you see the little fish?" She points to Muggy and the other mullet.

The boy says, "Yeah, but this is nothing like Gasparilla

Island State Park where we were yesterday."

"That seemed like a desert to me — all hot sand," says the girl.

"But what about those cool iguanas!" The boy reaches into the water to pick up a shell. Muggy and the other fish dart away.

The girl says, "I didn't like the iguanas. They look scary. And they don't belong there. They chase away the animals that are supposed to live there."

"I liked chasing them." The boy tosses his shell. Muggy hears the "kerplop" when it hits the water and watches the shell sink to the bottom.

The girl says, "I liked that old lighthouse. A family lived there, and I thought about how it would feel to live there."

"Oh, who cares about some old building. Let's go," the boy says.

They turn and run back to the shore. Muggy and the mullet scoot away.

HYPOXIA

by Barbara Davis, Port Charlotte Middle School, Charlotte County

Plants and animals need oxygen to live. Hypoxia occurs when water does not have enough oxygen to support life. Warm water holds less oxygen than cold water. In the summer, hypoxia can happen when the creatures breathe all the oxygen in shallow, warm water. Also, warm water from the Peace and Myakka rivers flows above the harbor's cooler salt water like a blanket, causing hypoxia. This may be a natural condition, but too much fertilizer or sewage treatment plant discharge creates food for algae. When algae grows well, it blocks sunlight. Some animals can move away or protect themselves from hypoxia; but others, like plants, cannot.

