

HARBOR HAPPENINGS

Uniting Central and Southwest Florida to protect water and wildlife

Winter 2020: Volume 24, Issue 1

Making a Difference

How You Can Get Involved to Protect Our Water and Wildlife

Every person can assist protecting the water, wildlife, and other natural resources they enjoy in their community. In this issue, learn about the Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership's upcoming educational events and citizen science volunteer opportunities, as well as how you might be eligible to receive funding assistance for creating new environmental education, research and restoration initiatives in your community.





Executive Director Update

Jennifer Hecker

Happy New Year!

The CHNEP team hopes each of you had a restful and joyous holiday season. As we embark on 2020, the beginning of a new decade, we look ahead towards a future of clean waters and plentiful wildlife.

The picture above was taken over the holidays, when I was fortunate enough to travel with my family down to the Caribbean. Swimming and snorkeling in clear water, seeing teeming schools of fish and healthy corals, reminded me of the magnificence of the world's oceans and estuaries.

However, alongside all the natural beauty, there was plastic trash sadly floating in the waves and washing up on the shores. Even in the turquoise waters of the Caribbean, there are challenges from humanity's collective impact on the environment.

Central and Southwest Florida are not alone in our struggle to protect the precious natural resources we enjoy. Globally, pollution and plastics are fouling waters and beaches. Warming water and changing water chemistry is affecting coral and shellfish growth, currents and other natural processes. Degradation and declining habitat quality is resulting in loss of wildlife world-wide.

It is easy to become overwhelmed but the situation is not hopeless. There are individual actions each one of us can take to make a positive difference to slow and stop this. Our cumulative actions can have a tremendous impact, especially when we think globally and act locally.



This is a new start for each of us to recommit to the things we care about, taking steps to put our beliefs and aspirations into action. We hope as part of your New Year's resolutions, that you will consider additional steps to take to protect our water and wildlife.

In this issue, we offer the tools, resources, and opportunities CHNEP provides to assist your efforts. Hopefully, there are some that will fit your personal goals and aspirations on how to support the effort.

The CHNEP is focused with renewed passion and determination to implement the new *Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan*. We believe that as a larger, stronger partnership, we can, and will, achieve more together in 2020 and beyond.

Thank you for your continued support,

Jennifer Hecker



Cara Czecholinkski



CHNEP is proud to yet again offer a fabulous free Nature Calendar! This calendar features donated images of native local plants and animals contributed during our annual photo contest.

If you are a Harbor Happening subscriber, you should have received the calendar by mail. If you are not, there are pick up locations throughout the CHNEP area listed on our website where they can be picked up on a first come basis.

Future calendars *will be available through subscription only*, so if you have not already done so, please go to CHNEP.org to “subscribe” today. Not only will you receive our quarterly magazines, but also next year’s calendar, mailed to your home free of charge!



Public Engagement

Supporting the public to become engaged in natural resource protection and restoration is one of the four core action areas in the *Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan*.

Our objective is to increase the proportion of the population that supports and participates in actions to protect and restore estuaries and watersheds.

We have a strategy with specific actions outlined, as well as a communications plan to reach the various audiences and communities in the CHNEP area.



Conservation Grants

Did you know that CHNEP offers grants to citizens and organizations, up to \$3,000 each, whom are engaging in environmental education, research or restoration activities?

This funding is designed to support citizens who want to undertake activities that implement the Water Quality Improvement, Hydrological Restoration, Fish, Wildlife & Habitat Protection or Public Engagement activities outlined in the *Comprehensive Conservation & Management Plan* (www.chnep.org/our-plan).

To learn more about grant requirements and how to apply, go to www.chnep.org/conservation-grants.



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CHNEP publishes this free educational magazine on recycled paper. Sign up for a free subscription on our website — www.CHNEP.org

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Ways You Can Make a Difference!



Learn

An informed, engaged public is needed to make choices and take actions that increase protection and restoration of estuaries and watersheds.

The Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership (CHNEP) offers resources to the public to learn about the water, wildlife, and other natural resource issues in their community, as well as what they can do to help protect and restore them. These include fact sheets, technical letters, magazines, posters, videos, and other educational materials.

The CHNEP magazine and annual nature calendar are mailed free to those who subscribe online through the CHNEP website (chnep.org).

Also, the CHNEP Water Atlas website (chnep.wateratlas.usf.edu) consolidates and makes all publicly accessible water quality data available, as well as



water quality analysis, a library of reference documents, flow data, and other useful information about the historical and current conditions of our natural resources.

Volunteer

Increased public engagement and action is needed to protect and restore the natural resources that support our quality of life and economy.

There are so many ways to get involved and make a difference. Whether it is conducting citizen science to assist with scientific monitoring and restoration work, or acting as a CHNEP ambassador to provide outreach and education about the program, your volunteering can be instrumental in creating positive change in our communities and environment.

CHNEP encourages interested individuals to subscribe for volunteer updates and notices, as well as offers free monthly volunteer activities at our headquarters in Punta Gorda, FL. We also organize and participate in events throughout the CHNEP area.





Take Action

Empowering and equipping communities with the resources they need to implement *Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan* actions is part of CHNEP's mission.

To do this, the CHNEP offers Conservation Grants up to \$3,000 to community partners to assist their efforts to carry out CCMP activities. These grants are awarded throughout the year until funding for them is expended for the year. Learn more by clicking on "Partner Grants" on the CHNEP website.

Contribute

Protecting and restoring the water and other natural resources we care about requires funding.

Contacting your local, state, and federal elected representatives to voice support for funding of land acquisition and management, water quality testing and restoration, and for the CHNEP itself helps to provide the financial resources critically needed.

Additionally, donating to the CHNEP allows us to expand our environmental education and resource protection/restoration efforts. Donations are accepted electronically through the CHNEP website or by mail to the CHNEP office (made payable to "City of Punta Gorda—CHNEP" as the City is CHNEP's fiscal host agency).



TIPS FOR PROTECTING OUR WATER & WILDLIFE

- ◆ **Use Florida-friendly plants for landscaping, which require less fertilizer and watering**
- ◆ **Install water conservation devices in your showers, toilets, etc.**
- ◆ **Use reusable bags and straws, as well as natural fiber clothing to reduce plastics in our environment**
- ◆ **Pick up and pack out trash when visiting parks and beaches**
- ◆ **Use gravel or crushed shell for pathways and parking areas rather than asphalt or concrete, to reduce stormwater runoff**
- ◆ **If you have a septic system, have it routinely inspected and maintained to reduce groundwater pollution**
- ◆ **If you have a boat, use pump-outs to empty holding tanks and move it to land for cleaning and maintenance**

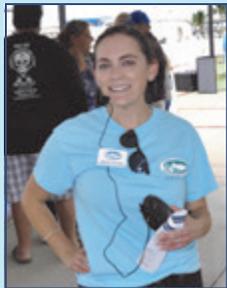




Many helping hands make 20th Ann

The Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership was pleased to once again plan and host a regional Nature Festival — the 20th annual — on November 16th at Lashley Park in downtown Punta Gorda, FL.

This event began two decades ago when there were few opportunities for the public to meet and access information about local environmental organizations they could become involved with. It has since provided tens of thousands of residents and visitors with such an opportunity.



The day was packed with 10 presentations from numerous environmental organizations on topics such as water quality, renewable energy, living with wildlife, and mangrove ecology. Over 40 educational exhibitors participated, as well as vendors selling nature art and native plants, and wildlife organizations bringing live animal ambassadors.



There was live music from various musicians, including as a high school jazz band. There were a variety of fun activities that included a large kids area with several nature crafts, water testing demonstrations, the





Annual Nature Festival a huge success!

building of a large interactive marine debris sculpture, paddle sport safety classes, as well as a kids sustainable fishing clinic.

Thank you to the generosity of our 20th Nature Festival Sponsors: City of Punta Gorda, Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast, Gary & Judi Brownell, Lemon Bay Conservancy, Mosaic, Mote Marine Laboratory, Peace River Audubon Society, Quest Ecology, Waste Management and WGCU Public Radio.

Additionally, special thanks to the 37 CHNEP volunteers who helped with this event! The contribution of these caring citizens enabled over 1,000 attendees to learn about our natural environment in Southwest Florida and the organizations who work to preserve it.

In 2020, CHNEP will be expanding our efforts to do events in all ten counties in our service area, as well as continuing our popular monthly volunteer events at the CHNEP headquarters office. Accordingly, we are presently looking for organizations whom would be willing to carry forth this event, whom we would sponsor. If you are interested, please contact the CHNEP office.





2020 Watershed Summit

<https://www.chnep.org/watershed-summit>

CHNEP is excited to once again host the tri-annual Watershed Summit. This Summit was created as a way for the public, local scientists, managers, policy makers, and resource users to come together to share research and restoration efforts, as well as critical environmental issues in Central and Southwest Florida. The 2020 Watershed Summit will be an opportunity for our partners to share their latest findings and to network.

The last CHNEP Watershed Summit in 2017 provided more than 50 scientists the opportunity to share their latest research findings with each other and the general public. Sessions included presentations on a variety of topics relating to water quality and quantity as well as habitat and living resources. The proceedings and copies of the presentations from that event are available on the event webpage listed above.

SAVE THE DATE

Please join us for this free public event, which will be held on Monday and Tuesday, June 1-2, 2020, in the “Collaboratory” building of the Southwest Florida Community Foundation (2031 Jackson St, Fort Myers, FL 33901). There is a link to the free registration online at the event webpage listed above. Seating is limited, so register to reserve your space today.

CALL FOR ABSTRACTS

If you would like to present at the upcoming 2020 Watershed Summit, you can submit an abstract regarding the oral or poster presentation you would like to share to advance knowledge and understanding of the natural environment in the CHNEP area. Presentations will be selected based on relevance and timeliness. There is no fee to submit an abstract or to present. A lightning-round session may also be featured. To submit your proposal for an oral or poster presentation, please complete the online submission form *by March 31st*.



CHNEP 2020 LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES



One of the most influential actions citizens can do to protect waters and wildlife in their communities is to comment on legislative issues. Everything from funding for, to legal requirements relating to, natural resource protection and restoration are taken up annually by our state and federal elected leaders. Below are the list of CHNEP 2020 Legislative Priorities that we hope you will take time to contact your legislative

STATE LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

- ◆ Continue and expand annual funding for the Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership, including recurrent dedicated funding (HB 791, SB 1608).
- ◆ Create or strengthen nutrient and pollution reduction policies to reduce loads from wastewater, septic, agricultural runoff, reclaimed water, stormwater, fertilizer and internal “legacy loads”.
- ◆ Support specific legislative authorization for the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to update stormwater standards in Environmental Resource Permitting state-wide to require stormwater systems that maximize the capture and treatment of nitrogen and phosphorus.
- ◆ Expand funding for innovative technology pilot projects, including technologies to address harmful algae blooms – especially those that promote natural system solutions.
- ◆ Establish a statewide, long-term funding program through the Florida Department of Environmental Protection with sufficient funds for competitive, local cost-share projects for estuary restoration .
- ◆ Support increased funding of Florida Forever and Florida Rural and Family Lands programs.
- ◆ Support of local governments’ continued ability to enact more stringent environmental protection ordinances.

FEDERAL LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES



Reauthorization of the National Estuary Program (HR 4044 / S.3171)

- ◆ Reauthorization of the National Estuary Program (NEP) is required to maintain important federal natural resource protection initiatives carried out by the Program (was last authorized in 2016). The approval of NEP Reauthorization Bills (HR 4044 and S.3171) will ensure critical water and habitat protection projects continue.

Continued National Estuary Program funding under current authorization

- ◆ NEP funding is proposed in House Interior Appropriations Bill for FY 2020 of \$750 thousand per NEP entity and \$4 million for Competitive Grant funding. Funding levels of \$750 thousand per NEP entity would put more funding in the field, consistent with the funding formula in the 2016 reauthorization.

Competitive Grant funding under current authorization

- ◆ The House-passed Appropriations Bill would fund a previously authorized Competitive Grant program at \$4 million for FY 2020; allowing entities within the National Estuary Program to apply to meet urgent community resiliency and resource protection needs. Competitive Grant funding at the House-proposed level of \$4 million for FY 2020 would put much-needed funding in the field, consistent with the 2016 reauthorization.

To find contact information for your state and federal legislative representatives, go to <https://www.usa.gov/elected-officials>



CHNEP Citizens Advisory Committee

Are you interested in becoming more involved with the CHNEP? Our Citizens Advisory Committee is in the process of reforming to encompass 2 regular representatives and 1 alternate from each of the 10 counties the CHNEP serves.

Meeting three times a year, this committee shares community natural resource protection needs and restoration opportunities, as well as helps to distribute CHNEP information to the counties they represent.

CAC members also help identify community partners and projects that further environmental education, as well as water and wildlife protection, for potential CHNEP funding.

CAC members can serve as a representative for any county they live and/or work in the CHNEP area. Presently, there are vacancies for added representatives from Polk, Hardee, Highlands, Manatee, Sarasota, DeSoto, and Glades Counties.

If you are interested in serving on the CAC, please contact the CHNEP office (941-575-5090) to learn more and plan on attending the next CHNEP CAC Meeting to be held on April 29th in Punta Gorda.



Bringing it Home

Practical Tips for Personal Action

With Florida's state legislative session starting in January running through mid-March, this is the time for citizens to be contacting their state and federal legislators to voice support for issues they care about. Below, we outline tips on how to effectively communicate with legislators.

Method

Not all modes of communication are treated the same. The most effective way to communicate is to call their office to verbally communicate your concerns to a staffer. Second most effective is a personalized letter sent to their Tallahassee or Washington D.C. offices. If you do not have time to do either of those, emails can still be effective if they are customized.

Mass emails or robocalls are generally the least effective, but better than nothing! Often, staff record how many people contact the office to oppose or express support for a given activity and relay that to the legislator.

Content

- ⇒ Use short clear subject line, including bill number if know it (ex. Support National Estuary Program funding, HB 791.)
- ⇒ Use correct title to personalize whom you're addressing (ex. Congressman, Senator, Representative).
- ⇒ Frame request with a positive tone
- ⇒ Conclude with thanking them for their time and consideration of your input



For the political process to work for the public's interest, it is vital for the public to communicate with their elected officials. We hope these tips, and the information in the Legislative Priorities article including how to find the contact information for your state and federal elected representatives, will assist you.

Government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the Earth.

Abraham Lincoln

GET INVOLVED



Join our Free Fun Monthly Volunteer Events!

Want to learn more and get involved? Come to one of our volunteer events where you will meet other citizens working to protect our area's waterways and wildlife.

At a recent event in December (pictured above), volunteers gathered to survey Ponce de Leon park in the annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count. Despite drizzly weather, they identified 33 bird species to be added to the national database. This information is important to record trends in bird diversity and populations.

This is just one of many great events we have had in recent months, which have included two large waterway clean-ups in August and September, and a presentation and bat house construction event in October to boost local bat populations. We also hosted educational Sustainable Fishing Clinics to teach kids basics about water quality and water pollution, followed by the big Nature Festival in

November to provide environmental education to our residents and visitors.

In the coming months, we will be offering events relating to horseshoe crab and water quality monitoring, native landscaping, and other activities to protect our waters and wildlife. Please check the CHNEP events calendar on our website for upcoming free events, helping spread the word and bringing friends and family to these events.

Your talents will be put to good use if you choose to sign up as a CHNEP volunteer! Once signed up, you will receive notices on upcoming volunteer opportunities, which you can choose whether to participate in given your availability and interests. We are presently in need of photographers, ambassadors, educators, and citizen scientists. We are eager to hear any other ideas you have as to how you can lend your time and talents. To learn more, please go to www.chnep.org/get-involved.



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In 2019, 226 CHNEP volunteers donated 863 hours of their time to protect our environment.



During the Audubon Christmas Bird Count, we observed 237 birds from 33 species.



We removed 1,300 pounds of trash from our waterways.



170 kids participated in our Sustainable Fishing Clinics.

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Thank you to 2019 CHNEP Donors!



We would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to everyone who sent kind notes and contributions to the CHNEP in 2019 to support our work. The following are a list of donors / donor organizations who contributed over \$50 and which were amenable to us acknowledging them by name:

Barrier Islands Park Society, Joshua Benton, Bocilla Island Conservancy, Gary & Judi Brownell, George & Linda Bryce, Laura & Richard Burkin, City of Punta Gorda, Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast, Debra Fewell, Friends of Highlands Hammock State Park, John & Jan Gildersleeve, Damon D. Hickey, PhD, Jelks Family Foundation, People for Protecting Peace River, Inc., Punta Gorda Garden Club, Quest Ecology, William Ridolf, Jennifer Starr & Thomas Terrell, and Len Tatko. *Thank you!*