

# Public Education & Involvement

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Volunteers prepare trees for planting at area preserves during a "Give A Day For The Bay" workday

Photo by Nanette Holland

## **Promote Public Involvement in Bay Restoration and Protection**

**PE-1****ACTION:**

Educate the public about the Tampa Bay watershed and involve citizens in activities that help improve and restore Tampa Bay.

**STATUS:**

Ongoing.

**BACKGROUND:**

The Tampa Bay Estuary Program continues to emphasize the importance of environmental education to the long-term health of the bay by creating a constituency of informed, involved citizens. This mission is aided by a Community Advisory Committee composed of residents from a variety of backgrounds and interests who share a common concern for the future of the bay.

CAC activities from 1998-2004 included co-sponsoring community forums on land and water linkage and desalination; serving as judges for the annual Bay Mini-Grants program; participating in several field trips to learn about issues affecting the bay; assisting staff by manning the TBEP exhibit at area events; and developing an action plan addressing stormwater ponds as part of the Program's first revision of the CCMP. The CAC doubled in size in 2002 when TBEP issued an open call for residents interested in participating, ultimately adding 18 new members with diverse interests and backgrounds.

In addition to serving as the staff coordinator for the CAC, the Program's Public Outreach Coordinator served as chair of the Manatee Awareness Coalition, an alliance of scientists, conservationists, industry representatives and others concerned about protection of Tampa Bay's population of endangered manatees. A community-based monitoring and education program called Manatee Watch, initially launched in Spring 1999, recruited and trained more than 150 community volunteers by January 2001 to assist scientists in boater activity research or provide safe boating information to area boaters. Tampa BayWatch coordinated the Manatee Watch program with oversight from the MAC. TBEP funding support for the program included purchase of materials for safe boating kits, such as polarized sunglasses and decals containing important manatee protection information, as well as support for a full-time program coordinator for the first year of the project. Staff support included assistance with press conferences, preparation of grant applications and promotional materials and other related tasks.

TBEP provided additional opportunities for citizens to become directly involved in helping the bay by launching a series of volunteer workdays in 2001. From 2001-2005, these "Give A Day For The Bay" events involved nearly 1,000 people in invasive plant removal, tree planting, litter cleanups and oyster reef installations. "Give A

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**ACTION PLAN**

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Day For The Bay” is held quarterly in partnership with local governments and non-profit organizations.

The Bay Mini-Grant program also provides a forum for public participation in bay restoration. Grants of up to \$7,500 are awarded yearly to neighborhoods, schools, and non-profit organizations for environmental education, restoration and pollution prevention projects.

The approval of the Tampa Bay Estuary license plate in 1999 has provided a steady source of revenues for the Bay Mini-Grant program, financing more than \$500,000 in community-based bay restoration and improvement projects as of 2005.

Other public outreach accomplishments during the 1998-2004 time frame included:

- Producing, in partnership with the Southwest Florida Water Management District, a colorful pull-out poster brochure emphasizing the need for safe disposal of hazardous household chemicals and promoting non-toxic cleaning and gardening alternatives.
- Redesigning TBEP’s website, adding special quarterly features and interactive components such as a user-driven calendar of events and community bulletin board. A companion listserv was created that allows TBEP staff to notify mailing list members of important meetings and news about Tampa Bay.
- Coordinating design of an educational poster on the wildlife of Tampa Bay and the importance of protecting the habitats that support those creatures. The poster, called “Wild and Wonderful Tampa Bay: Habitat Is Where It’s At” featured a photo montage on the front and lesson plans, field trips extensions, critter descriptions and a resource list on the back.
- Coordinating design, production and distribution of nearly 1 million inserts promoting the Tampa Bay Estuary license plate. The inserts were distributed in City of Tampa utility bills and auto tag renewal notices in Manatee and Pinellas counties.
- Coordinating production of a poster promoting the license plate, and distributing the poster to every marina and bait shop in the region.
- Coordinating design and production of a revamped Tampa Bay Boater’s Guide offering several new information layers, including manatee zones, fishing piers, anchorages and marine towing companies.
- Creating the Video Lending Library, which allows anyone to borrow an environmental video from TBEP’s extensive collection for up to a month.
- Developing and implementing the “Eyes on the Bay” invasive species awareness program, including a special section on the TBEP website, a slide show, a reporting network and a video showing residents how to eradicate invasive plants in their backyards.

- Producing the “Tampa Bay Ethical Angler Wallet Card,” which promotes responsible angling in the bay by listing important resource numbers along with regulations governing harvest of the 12 most commonly targeted fish species in the bay. The card is available in both English and Spanish.
- Sponsoring summer teacher training workshops, with USGS, on the use of aerial and satellite imagery to detect changes in area wetlands.

**PE-1**

With a wealth of outstanding environmental education initiatives and providers in the region, TBEP’s Public Outreach strategy seeks to address gaps in existing efforts – audiences and issues that other organizations are not addressing – to minimize duplication. Areas of particular interest to TBEP in recent years have included boater education and invasive species awareness and prevention. Future education campaigns are planned to raise citizen awareness of the water quality impacts of pet waste and air pollution.

As education will always be needed, this action should remain in the CCMP in perpetuity. Future implementation should capitalize on existing programs and partnerships wherever possible, but TBEP should also continue its leadership role in identifying areas of need and developing innovative, effective programs to inform citizens about the bay and involve them in its protection.

**STRATEGY:**

**STEP 1** Continue to reproduce and update successful existing materials, such as the Tampa Bay Boater’s Guide, localized boating guides, and invasive species identification and removal guides and videos.

**Responsible parties:** TBEP

**Schedule:** Ongoing

**STEP 2** Invest in educational programming that will reach a wider audience, specifically through production of a PBS-quality documentary on Tampa Bay that could be broadcast statewide as well as regionally.

**Responsible parties:** TBEP

**Schedule:** PBS film initiated in 2004 through contract with film producer; production and post-production to take place in 2005-2006; broadcast planned for 2006.

**STEP 3** Expand the use of the Internet to provide information to bay residents, through upgrades and additions to TBEP’s website as well as development of the Tampa Bay Estuary Atlas, an Internet-based, highly graphical compendium of maps, resource links, historical information and real-time data about Tampa Bay.

**Responsible parties:** TBEP for TBEP website; University of South Florida’s Center for Community Design and Research for development and maintenance of the Estuary Atlas

**Schedule:** TBEP website updates are completed quarterly; USF launched Estuary Atlas website in Fall 2005

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**ACTION PLAN**

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- STEP 3 Provide more educational products in Spanish for the large Hispanic community in Tampa Bay.  
**Responsible parties:** TBEP, local governments, SWFWMD  
**Schedule:** Ongoing; TBEP has produced a Spanish version of the Ethical Angler Wallet Card and contributed funds for a Spanish version of the monofilament recycling brochure.
- STEP 4 Allocate a portion of the annual Bay Mini-Grant funding to help meet priority outreach needs identified in TBEP's workplan.  
**Responsible parties:** TBEP, TBEP's Community Advisory Committee  
**Schedule:** Beginning in 2005, TBEP's Community Advisory Committee, which selects each year's Mini-Grant recipients, authorized an increase in the maximum grant funding, from \$7,500 to \$10,000, for up to three priority projects identified as priorities by TBEP staff. The 2005 special RFP topics are community monitoring of invasive species, pet waste education and awareness of the link between air pollution and water quality. The projects must meet all regular Mini-Grant criteria for eligibility, and selection of recipients will be made by the CAC with input from staff.
- STEP 5 Improve tracking of distribution of educational materials, and evaluation of the effectiveness of products and programs.  
**Responsible parties:** TBEP, all partners engaged in education and outreach  
**Schedule:** TBEP initiated tracking database for its materials in 2005; pre- and post-surveys being developed for "Bay-Friendly Boater" program to assess audience and effectiveness of messages; social marketing concepts being incorporated by SWFWMD, TBEP and other organizations. into existing and new programs as appropriate.