

SEAGRASS-FRIENDLY BACKCOUNTRY BOATING REQUIRES SKILL AND CAUTION

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With all the wind lately, more people that would normally go offshore have had their sights on the shallow water protected areas of our backcountry. Boating in the backcountry is fun and a delightful family excursion. However, boating in the backcountry is tricky and not to be undertaken by anyone without some skill at judging the difference between 2 and 4 foot depths without the aid of a fathometer.

The backcountry areas of the Florida Keys include a collection of uninhabited islands scattered among shallow-water seagrass flats and tidal channels on the north and west sides of the main island chain. And nowhere is the seagrass as prevalent as in our backcountry waters.

It is worth repeating that navigating through the backcountry is difficult, especially for those unfamiliar with the shallow waters. The tidal channels are not well marked and unless you can see the bottom to determine relative depth, you are sure to run aground or at the very least, your boat propeller can rip up the seagrass and dig trenches through the shallow seagrass meadows.

If you want to venture out into the backcountry and you are not sure of the water depth - GO SLOWLY. Besides, the slower you go the more wildlife you can see and the more you are able to truly enjoy the unique natural environment of the Florida Keys. Even drifting through the shallows is rewarding because you can see a variety of marine creatures, including sharks, that you might otherwise miss. Plus, it is easier to back off a flat that you have hit at slow speed than one on which you hit while on a plane and end up hard aground. Mistakes at slow speed obviously minimize possible damage to the habitat.

These shallow water habitats largely consist of seagrass meadows that are one of the most productive natural communities in the world that helps to sustain the local marine life and provides for the best commercial and recreational fishing in the state. Under normal conditions seagrasses, especially turtle grass, can reproduce and slowly fill in barren areas. In some areas of the backcountry, however, tidal currents are strong and the surrounding seagrasses may be deterred from growing into damaged areas. In some cases, the successful re-growth of seagrasses can even be undermined by the erosive forces of currents and an increase in boat traffic.

All environments, including seagrasses, can withstand some disruption without serious consequences. There is a growing concern, however, that the cumulative effect of the increased boating in the backcountry may have lasting negative impacts on seagrass communities. You can help reduce this destruction by remaining in the tidal channels, avoiding the shallower "shortcuts," and by proceeding cautiously. If you do find yourself aground or in shallow water, you should stop, trim up your engine, wait for high tide, or try to pole to deeper water. If all else fails, call either the local Coast Guard or Florida Fish and Wildlife for help. Do not attempt to use your engine to power off the grass flat; this could damage your motor as well as the seagrasses.