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Contact: Cheva Heck
Seagrass Outreach Partnership
305.292.0311, ext. 26
305.304.0179 (cell)

Seagrass Awareness Month Kicks Off with Free Festival
Event Features Fun Activities for Kids and Adults

Florida Governor Jeb Bush has declared March Seagrass Awareness Month statewide. "Awareness of the problems facing this vital natural resource will help to create an understanding of the ways seagrass damage can impact both the economic and ecological value of our marine resources," states the governor's proclamation. Monroe County and municipalities such as Key West, Marathon and Islamorada have issued proclamations recognizing the importance of seagrass habitat to the economy and environment of the Florida Keys.

Seagrass meadows provide critical nursery and feeding grounds for fish and other marine life populations. In Monroe County alone, the estimated total value of just six seagrass dependent species in 2001 was about \$35 million. Seagrass also filters and stabilizes sediments, helping to create the clear waters for which the Keys are famous.

"If you make your living from tourism or fishing here in Florida, your livelihood directly depends on healthy seagrass habitat" said Seagrass Outreach Partnership chair Mary Tagliareni. "During Seagrass Awareness Month, we focus on helping Florida residents and visitors understand that while seagrass isn't as breathtaking as the coral reef, it's just as important to our way of life."

Major threats to seagrass include coastal development, dredge and fill projects and deteriorating water quality. Damage from poor boating practices also

threatens seagrass habitat. According to a 1995 study by the Florida Marine Research Institute, approximately 30,000 acres of seagrass in Monroe County bear propeller scars, more than any other county in the state.

Boaters can become partners in protecting seagrass habitat by wearing polarized sunglasses, learning to read the water, operating their boats in deeper water and acquiring and using basic navigational skills and aids.

The Seagrass Outreach Partnership is a coalition of South Florida groups that has worked since 1998 to raise awareness of the importance of seagrass habitat and to educate boaters about ways to prevent seagrass damage. For more information on seagrass, visit the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary web site at <http://www.fknms.nos.noaa.gov>.

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Photo Caption: A little girl learns about creatures that live in the seagrass through the “Build a Seagrass Meadow” activity. This year’s Seagrass Festival runs from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Worldwide Sportsman, mile marker 81.5 Overseas Highway bayside in Islamorada. The event is free and offers fun activities for both adults and kids. **Photo Credit:** Nancy Diersing, Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary