



Big Edwards Island: Shallows teem with tiny creatures that become breakfast for birds.

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*Where has all the seagrass gone?*

It sure sounded like a good idea when the Army Corps of Engineers proposed in 2000 to “restore” a trio of bird rookery islands in Roberts Bay. Currents and wakes from the Intracoastal Waterway were eroding their steep sides. The idea: dump tons of boulders into an “L-shaped” breakwater to shield the islands. Eventually, Sarasota County and the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program backed the \$1.2 million, year-long construction project, completed in February, 2008.

That same month, helicopters flew over Roberts Bay to scan the bottom for sea-grass, part of a

routine check-up. Because seagrass shelters many creatures, its growth tells much about the bay's health. The grass can't grow if tiny floating plants prevent sunlight from reaching the bottom, as happens sometimes when too much nitrogen (from fertilizer, say, or wastewater) washes into the bay.

Prior helicopter scans had found great news for Sarasota's bays: seagrass was increasing, a sign the bays were clearing up. In Roberts Bay, by far the biggest crop of new seagrass between 2001 and 2006 appeared on maps as a growing green blob next to the Bird Colony Islands. It spread from the Intracoastal Waterway to the Bay's northeast corner.

Unfortunately, as it turned out, that's about where the construction crew began barging and dumping in 2007 for the Bird Colony Island restoration project. By 2008, scans showed that the big new blob of seagrass had vanished, though gains remained in other parts of Roberts Bay.

Too bad, of course. But wait, it gets worse.















