

The Big Debate: Midnight Pass



Through Palmer Point Beach, Siesta Key now connects to Casey Key over Midnight Pass, which was closed off by human intervention in 1984. Since that time, there has been controversy over this small strip of land, its possible reopening, and the impact any changes could have on the local ecosystem.

According to research by the Midnight Pass Society, it's likely that the pass has existed for hundreds of years and that Indians settled in the inlet for convenient access to the Gulf of Mexico. There was a detrimental impact on the natural procession of the waters in the early 1960s when the Intracoastal Waterway was widened by 100 feet and deepened by 10 feet. More than 200,000 cubic yards of dredge was dumped in the process and, as a result, water flow in the vicinity was shifted and the course of the northern channel was obstructed. The imbalance caused the pass to migrate to the north and erosion followed. In 1983, Mote Marine lost its shark tanks and the property of two homeowners was in jeopardy. At that time, state and local authorities permitted the closing of the pass and its relocation 1,000 feet south. However, several attempts to reestablish the channel failed, and the pass was left closed, which resulted in the creation of Palmer Point Beach and the current land bridge to Casey Key.

Much debate has ensued over attempts to reopen the pass. The plans reported in 2005, for example, called for a channel 500 feet long, 400 feet wide, and 12 to 14 feet deep that would bisect Palmer Point Park, according to a report in the March issue of Sarasota Magazine. In January of 2009, county commissioners voted unanimously to abandon the effort to reopen the pass because another \$500,000-plus would be required to attempt an unlikely bid to win state and federal approval for the project, according to the Sarasota Herald-Tribune. "The county applied to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to reopen Midnight Pass four years ago, and spent \$875,000 preparing an application. But it was rejected [in December 2008] by

DEP, which issued a 24-page denial with a long list of reasons the agency objected to the pass,” the article noted.

Those who wish to leave the pass “as is” claim that the current marine environment should be protected because it provides an important nesting habitat for sea turtles, as well as a shelter for birds. The area also contains a young mangrove forest, abundant sea grass, and a beach that is used widely by boaters and walkers. The resulting increase in boat traffic from a new channel could be detrimental to birds, nesting sea turtles, and manatees, they claim.

On the flip side, proponents of dredging the pass would like to see boat access reopened from Little Sarasota Bay to the Gulf of Mexico, as boats no longer would have to traverse the long haul down Casey Key and out through the passage between North Jetty Park and Venice. They also note that nature’s original path should be respected and the area should be returned to its original state of evolution. The new hydrology would improve water circulation, reduce pollution and increase the amount of sea grass, fish, and birds in the immediate vicinity.

Regardless of which side of the fence you are on when it comes to this debate, make sure that you don’t miss the opportunity to explore this natural haven while on Siesta Key. You can walk down to the pass from Turtle Beach, although it’s not an easy trek on the soft sand, or paddle down Blind Pass Lagoon and bear to the right when you reach the juncture of Little Sarasota Bay. If you are in a kayak, a trip around the tranquil mangrove-filled islands in the 35-acre Jim Neville Wildlife Preserve is worth the extra exercise. It starts at the intersection of the lagoon and Little Sarasota Bay and bears to the north, where you will see pelicans, herons, and egrets among the birds, as well as an abundance of fish jumping in the shallow waters. Plus, stop at some of the tiny secluded cove-like areas where you will find beautiful spots to meditate and take in the wildlife. Manatee and dolphins are spotted frequently in the area during the summer months, and it is a winter home for many migrating birds. The largest spoil island was created by the dredging of Little Sarasota Bay in the 1950s and 1960s, and it is now surrounded by approximately 20 small islets.

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