

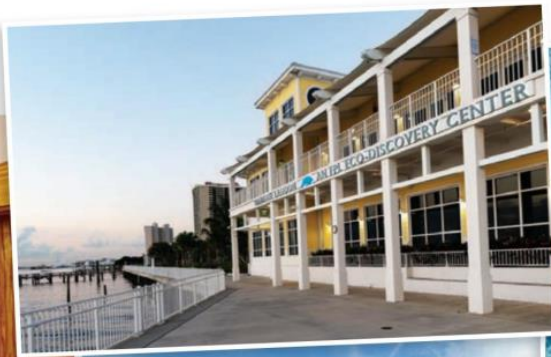
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WILDLIFE WARRIORS

FRIENDS OF MANATEE LAGOON IS PASSIONATE ABOUT PROTECTING FLORIDA MANATEES AND THEIR MARINE LIFE HABITATS

By Valerie Staggs



The warm waters next to the Manatee Lagoon in Riviera Beach provide comfort during winter months for the manatees that live along our coastline. Floating beneath the surface alongside this FPL Eco-Discovery Center, these magnificent creatures have no idea how much is being done in the building above them to ensure they remain healthy and happy in their ocean home.

Opened in 2016, Manatee Lagoon is dedicated to educating the public about manatees and inspiring communities to preserve and protect Florida's environment and wildlife. Visitors delight in the center's exhibits, many courtesy of a nonprofit organization known as Friends of Manatee Lagoon (FOML).

Founded in 2021, FOML was formed to engage the community in conservation efforts that protect manatees and their fragile habitats. The organization has helped fund exhibits including a seagrass aquarium and seagrass wall. "Seagrass is essential to our ecosystem," says Anne Messer, executive director of FOML. "It acts as a filter and is the primary food source for manatees and sea turtles."

A new seagrass nursery is the latest ex-

hibit for which FOML provided funding. The nursery consists of aboveground tanks where small crops of seagrass are harvested from the Lake Worth Lagoon then grown in water piped in from the lagoon. Once mature, the seagrass is transplanted back into the lagoon.

Messer explains that the exhibits are part of FOML's community-wide seagrass restoration program. "We want to train community groups on how to do seagrass matting in which we adhere seagrass saplings to burlap cloths, which in turn can be planted in the Lake Worth Lagoon."

A new "Beneath the Sea" exhibit, also funded by FOML, is slated to open this year. By following a mother and calf, the exhibit will provide an immersive experience into a typical day in the life of a manatee.

The work of FOML goes well beyond building exhibits. Through its large volunteer program, FOML attends community events to raise awareness and educate the public on

manatees and the importance of conservation. They also offer the Adopt-A-Manatee program that lets people adopt one of 33 wild manatees that are tracked through a partnership with Save the Manatee Club.

For Manatee Lagoon, the work that FOML does is invaluable. "We are grateful for the generous support from Friends of Manatee Lagoon [which] enables us to enhance our exhibits, creating a more immersive and educational experience for our visitors," says Zack Greenberg, operations manager for Manatee Lagoon. "FOML's involvement in organizing and hosting various volunteer activities fosters community engagement, expands our reach, and aids in the preservation and conservation efforts of these magnificent creatures. Together, we are making a positive impact on the future of manatees and their habitat." (*friendsofmanateelagoon.org*) ◀◀