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ENVIRONMENT

Friends of Manatee Lagoon's Soirée for Seagrass at Manatee Lago

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[Friends of Manatee Lagoon](#) welcomed several hundred guests to its fourth annual Soirée for Seagrass, a waterfront celebration and fundraiser at Manatee Lagoon in Riviera Beach on Nov. 14.

The fundraiser raised \$140,000, according to Sarah Marmion, Executive Director of the Friends of Manatee Lagoon, who said the money "will go directly toward education and raising awareness about the critical role seagrass plays in ensuring manatees have a sufficient food source."

Marmion said she was just as proud of the broader community impact.

She said the event "brought together environmental advocates, community leaders, local businesses, and families— all rallying around manatee conservation and initiatives that protect seagrass."

She said hundreds of attendees left with a deeper understanding of the environmental challenges manatees face and actionable ways they can help. She said many signed up for volunteer opportunities, from water quality monitoring to habitat restoration projects. "We strengthened partnerships with local organizations committed to protecting Florida's coastal ecosystems," she added.

Perhaps most importantly, Marmion said they expanded their reach and visibility, "turning supporters into ambassadors who will continue spreading awareness about seagrass health, water quality, and manatee protection long after the event ended."

Marmion mentioned the Unusual Mortality Event during 2021-2022 when a quarter of the Florida Manatee population starved to death because of massive seagrass loss in the Indian River Lagoon. The event was declared over by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission in 2025. Marmion said they showed a short film Nov. 14 that was made before the mortality event that captured the sounds that water bubbles on seagrass make when they move. The film then segued to show a mother and calf communicating with each other. "The whole audience went quiet and you could hear a pin drop: sometimes we just have to be reminded of what's happening right around us, albeit underwater, to care," she said.

The evening featured Seagrass Spritzers, dinner-by-the-bite, live music, and spirited bidding during both live and silent auctions.

Emceed by Jay Cashmere, the event included a tribute to James "Buddy" Powell, a pioneer in Florida manatee research who passed away earlier this year. For more than five decades, Powell championed conservation through science and education, helping establish coastal protected areas in Florida, West Africa, Belize and Cuba. His work also advanced protections for endangered species such as North Atlantic right whales and sea turtles.

More: [Watch manatees as they play in the warm lagoon waters in Palm Beach County on winter days](#)

More: [Manatee season start: Some gentle giants make their way to Manatee Lagoon](#)

The evening also honored Tom Fitz, founder of Schoolyard Films, as the 2025 Conservationist of the Year. An Emmy- and BAFTA-winning cinematographer whose credits include BBC, PBS and National Geographic, Fitz now focuses on producing free, curriculum-ready films that bring environmental education to K-12 classrooms worldwide.