

3.0 PUBLIC ACCESS AND RECREATIONAL USE

The Myakka River, like many rivers in Florida, is a popular destination for outdoor recreation activities. Existing access and support facilities are clustered in two areas: the Upper Myakka Lake and Lower Myakka Lake areas of the Myakka River State Park and the southern portion of the river near U.S. Highway 41. This section describes the existing access and support facilities that exist within the river area and describes current use.

3.1 EXISTING ACCESS FACILITIES

The Myakka River State Park is the primary public access point to the Myakka River. The park, which covers almost 29,000 acres, is located in Manatee and Sarasota Counties approximately 12 miles east of Sarasota. Access to the park is via State Road 72 to the southern entrance and via State Road 70 and County Road 780 to the northern entrance.

The park offers scenic natural features and facilities for both active and passive recreational activities. The park contains Upper Myakka Lake; Lower Myakka Lake; and diverse natural communities including marshes, sloughs, and unique upland communities as some of the significant natural features. Visitors can enjoy viewing a virtually unchanged Florida landscape. Deer, alligators and many species of wading birds are abundant, as well as thousands of waterfowl in the winter months. In addition, ospreys, bald eagles, sandhill cranes, and other threatened and endangered species are commonly seen in the park. Approximately 7,500 acres of the park is designated as a wilderness preserve. The preserve resembles a Florida undisturbed by man's activities. Limited public access is permitted for such activities as hiking, fishing, sightseeing, canoeing, nature study, and research.

The park offers many environmental educational facilities, beginning with an interpretive center with exhibits of wildlife and plant communities and a video presentation. Park rangers provide guided walks and campfire programs seasonally and offer birdwatching education during the winter season. Concessionaire-run airboat and land tours are also available at the park. A 70-passenger airboat offers a tour of the Upper Myakka Lake. Conducted year around except during the month of September, the tour operates three times per day every day, seasonally four times daily, except on Tuesday. The tour

provides a panoramic view of the lake while narrators describe the ecology of the shoreline, streams, flora and fauna. A 50-passenger tour train offers a land tour of the park. The tour operates seasonally (winter and spring) two times per day and provides a view of remote areas of subtropical forests and marshlands while a guide explains the native habitat and history of the area.

The park also offers a wide range of recreational uses. Among the activities offered are hiking trails (39 miles), photography, fishing, shoreline access (3 miles), picnicking, canoeing, equestrian trails (15 miles), bicycling, camping (both full facility and primitive), and overnight cabins. The Myakka River State Park boat ramp is the main launching point for canoeing, fishing, and other river and lake-related activities for the north portion of the park. Several other public access points exist north of the park, including State Road 70, State Road 64, and Myakka City-Wauchula Road. However, these are highway/road crossings and only provide an opportunity to fish from the roadside or bridge.

The Carlton Reserve is an undeveloped 25,000-acre tract located east of the south portion of the state park and on the east side of the Myakka River. There are currently no public recreational facilities in the reserve. Sarasota County has plans to provide limited public access to the river in the vicinity of Border Road for such activities as canoeing and hiking. However, the reserve will have few structural facilities. The City of North Port's Butler Memorial Park is located adjacent to Price Boulevard and contains a canoe launch, hiking path, and other nonresource-based recreational facilities. The 40-acre park is located on Myakkahatchee Creek, several miles north of its confluence with the Myakka River. Crane Park, a small community park operated by Manatee County in Myakka City, borders the Myakka River. The park has limited facilities, including picnic tables and rest rooms, but no river access for boating.

There are three private recreational facilities for public use located along the southern portion of the Myakka River. These facilities include Snook Haven, Ramblers Rest Resort, and Becky's Bait. North Port Yacht Club and Harbor Cove Boat Basin are also located nearby on Myakkahatchee Creek.

3.2 CURRENT RECREATIONAL USE PATTERNS

The Myakka River's unique natural features and its proximity to the urban areas of West Central Florida make it a popular outdoor recreation area. The river supports many types of recreational activities. Some of the activities include fishing, canoeing, swimming, birding, nature study, photography, camping, hiking, motor boating, picnicking, and hunting. Motor boating is restricted by physical limitations in the portion of the river north of Upper Myakka Lake and from Lower Myakka Lake downstream to Downs' Dam, which is 0.5 mile south of the southern boundary of the state park. Activities such as hiking and camping are restricted to public use lands within the state park.

APOXSEE, Sarasota County's Comprehensive Plan, indicates that in terms of regional recreational facilities (i.e., Myakka River State Park) the area has sufficient facilities to accommodate the population it serves. With the anticipated opening of the Carlton Reserve for limited public-use facilities, public recreation lands will extend from the northern boundary of the Myakka River State Park at County Road 780 to the vicinity of Border Road.

To determine actual usage of the river, an informational survey was conducted on Saturday, March 18, 1989. Survey locations were the Myakka River State Park boat ramp, Snook Haven, and Becky's Bait. Observations of boat traffic and occasional surveys were also made at the Myakka River State Park bridge and the Border Road bridge. The surveying was conducted between 10:00 AM and 6:00 PM. Additionally, interviews were conducted with employees of the facilities at the survey locations.

The survey confirmed that the Myakka River is a major recreational resource of the region. On the day of the survey, 112 watercraft were observed on the river. These watercraft were at different locations along the river and varied in boat type and activity observed. Figure 3-1 provides a breakdown of the type and location of watercraft observed on the Myakka River.

On the day of the survey, boats utilized for fishing accounted for approximately 50 percent of all watercraft and were the most popular type of boat at every location. This is primarily due to the fact that the Myakka River, Upper Myakka Lake, and Lower Myakka Lake provide a majority of the freshwater fishing resources of the region. Shallow draft fishing boats and

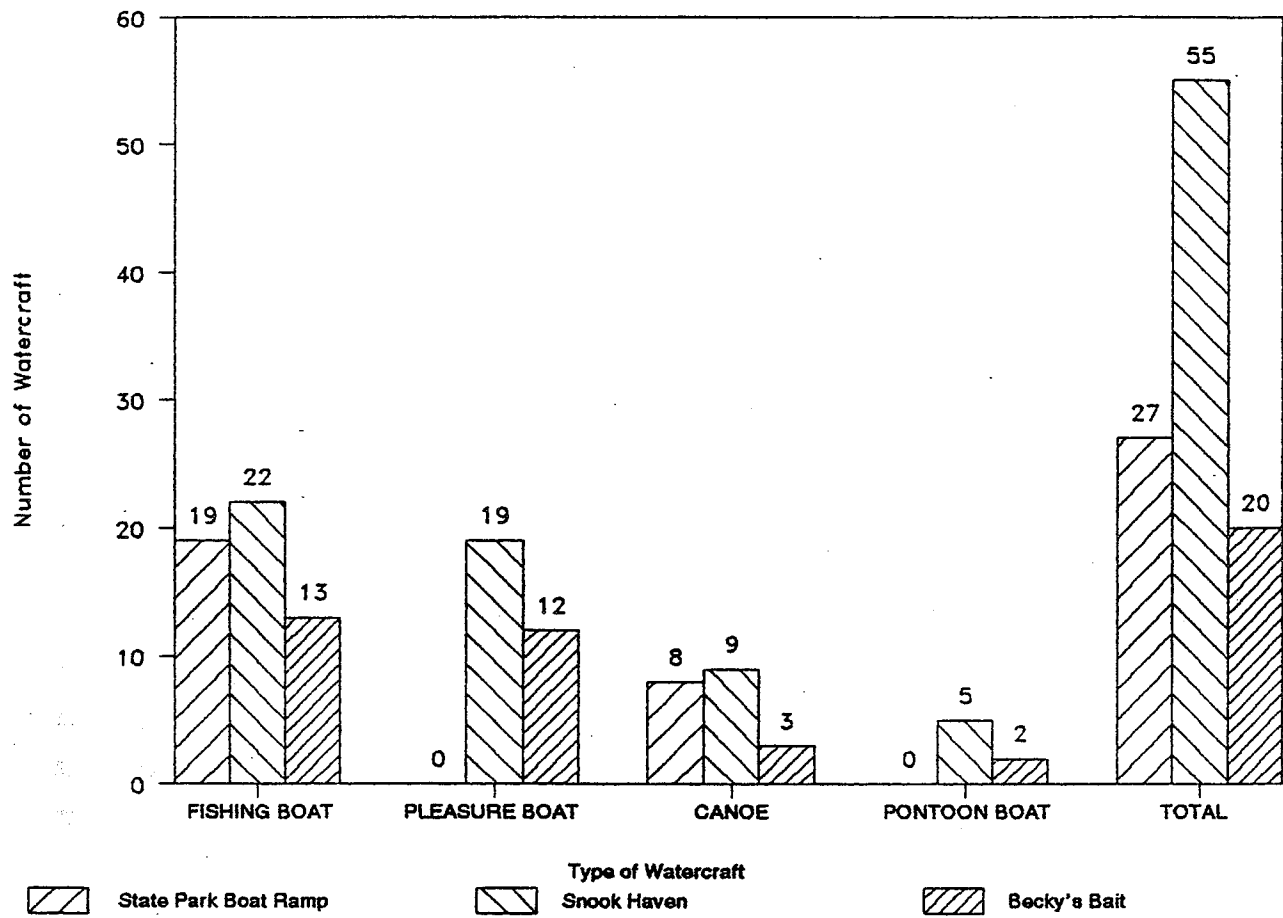


Figure 3-1
 TYPES AND LOCATIONS OF WATERCRAFT OBSERVED
 (MARCH 18, 1989) RECREATION INFORMATION SURVEY

SOURCE: HUNTER, 1989.

MYAKKA WILD AND SCENIC RIVER
 MANAGEMENT PLAN

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canoes accounted for all of the watercraft observed at the state park boat ramp primarily due to the natural features of the river and lake (i.e., generally shallow). Snook Haven had the most boating activity of the areas observed. This may be due to two reasons: the easy access from I-75 and U.S. Highway 41 and the existing facilities, including a restaurant and bar, make it a well known and popular spot for users of the river.

In lower areas of the river, the facilities at Snook Haven and Becky's Bait are utilized by pleasure craft; whereas, pleasure craft are generally unable to use the state park boat ramp or the lake is not a favored area for use by larger pleasure craft owners, in the northern portion of the river. The ability of larger boats to use the lower Myakka River is primarily due to the natural widening and deepening of the river as it approaches its confluence with Charlotte Harbor.

Those people surveyed were also asked which areas of the river they use during the year. Table 3-1 presents information on the areas of the river that those people surveyed frequent. The southern third of the river is the most frequently used. This area of the river is more heavily populated than any other section of the river and includes several communities including Myakka Shores, Charlotte Beach, North Port, Port Charlotte, and El Jobean, which are located near the southern end of the river. All have increasing populations and relatively easy access to the river. Additionally, this part of the river is sufficiently wide and deep to accommodate larger, more powerful watercraft.

Boats from the Charlotte Harbor communities of Punta Gorda, South Punta Gorda, and Port Charlotte are able to travel up the river to use the facilities such as those available at Snook Haven; however, people who frequently use the lower areas of the river do not usually use the upper areas of the river. Few people in any location frequently use the upper reaches (north of Upper Myakka Lake) of the river because of the lack of a readily distinguishable channel and related physical restrictions and navigation problems.

The survey's main objective was to provide information on the level of recreational activity on the river and the types and locations of these activities along the river. Table 3-2 provides a detailed breakdown of recreational activities by activity type and location that those surveyed participate in throughout the year.

Table 3-1. Boating Activity by Segment--March 18, 1989

| River Segment | Number of Boats |
|---|-----------------|
| Upper Reaches North of CR 780 | 5 |
| Upper Myakka Lake Area | 29 |
| Lower Myakka Lake Area | 16 |
| Southern Boundary of Lower Myakka Lake to Snook Haven | 28 |
| Snook Haven to U.S. 41 | 40 |
| U.S. 41 to Charlotte Harbor | 35 |

Source: Hunter, 1989.

The two most popular activities of those surveyed were boat fishing and pleasure boating. Nearly three-fourths of those people surveyed river-wide boat fish on the river. More than 90 percent of those people surveyed at the state park boat ramp participate in boat fishing. Fifty percent of those surveyed pleasure boat on the river; however, this activity is more popular in the southern reaches of the river. Only one-third of those surveyed at the state park boat ramp pleasure boat on the river.

Since boat fishing and pleasure boating are the two most popular activities, it seems logical that boat ramp use would also be popular. Forty-eight percent of those surveyed use boat ramp facilities on the river. Over 80 percent of those surveyed at the state park boat ramp use such ramps. A lower amount of boat ramp use occurs in the southern areas of the river due to aforementioned reasons, such as the boater's use of other facilities farther south in Charlotte Harbor.

Nature watching, picnicking, and nonboat fishing are other popular activities. Approximately 43 percent of those people surveyed participate in each of these activities. These activities are undertaken by a majority of those surveyed at the state park boat ramp. Additionally, hiking, tent camping, and RV/trailer camping are much more popular activities of those surveyed at the state park boat ramp than at other locations since the state park also offers facilities for these activities. The state park offers an abundance of opportunities to participate in these activities since it is the only public area where participants do not need to be on or immediately adjacent to the river.

Information in addition to the recreational information survey was obtained from employees of the facilities at the survey locations. On the day of the survey, attendance at the state park was 1,191 people. Many of these people went on the guided airboat tour of the Upper Myakka Lake. Park employees indicated that recreational activity in the park on the day of the survey was typical of weekend usage during the busy season. Park personnel also indicated that weekend mornings from January to May are the most popular times for recreational activity in the park.

Table 3-2. Participation in Recreational Activities on the Myakka River by Type and Location (March 18, 1989 Recreation Information Survey Results)

| Activity | State Park Boat Ramp (27 Surveys) | | Spook Haven (41 Surveys) | | Becky's Bait (34 Surveys) | | Total (102 Surveys) | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|
| | Number of Participants | Percent of Total Respondents | Number of Participants | Percent of Total Respondents | Number of Participants | Percent of Total Respondents | Number of Participants | Percent of Total Respondents |
| Swimming | 4 | 14.8 | 10 | 24.4 | 5 | 14.7 | 19 | 18.6 |
| Nonboat Fishing | 14 | 51.2 | 17 | 41.5 | 13 | 38.2 | 44 | 43.1 |
| Boat Fishing | 25 | 92.6 | 26 | 63.4 | 23 | 67.7 | 74 | 72.5 |
| Pleasure Boating | 9 | 33.3 | 25 | 61.0 | 17 | 50.0 | 51 | 50.0 |
| Boat Ramp Use | 22 | 81.5 | 14 | 34.1 | 13 | 38.2 | 49 | 48.0 |
| Canoeing | 13 | 48.1 | 16 | 39.0 | 6 | 17.6 | 35 | 34.3 |
| Picnicking | 22 | 81.5 | 12 | 29.3 | 11 | 32.4 | 45 | 44.1 |
| RV/Trailer Camping | 7 | 25.9 | 5 | 12.2 | 2 | 5.9 | 14 | 13.7 |
| Tent Camping | 12 | 44.4 | 8 | 19.5 | 1 | 2.9 | 21 | 20.6 |
| Hiking | 15 | 55.5 | 5 | 12.2 | 2 | 5.9 | 22 | 21.6 |
| Nature Watching/ Photography | 23 | 85.2 | 14 | 34.1 | 7 | 20.6 | 44 | 43.1 |
| Hunting | 1 | 3.7 | 3 | 7.3 | 0 | 0.0 | 4 | 3.9 |
| Other | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 1* | 2.9 | 1 | 1.0 |

* Crabbing

Source: Hunter, 1989.

Interviews were also conducted with employees of the other two survey locations, Snook Haven and Becky's Bait. Employees at Snook Haven indicated that the period of most activity at their location generally occurs Saturday mornings from January to June. The ramp is closed on Sunday's during weekly barbeque events. Fishing and pleasure cruising are the major activities observed by employees at Snook Haven. Employees estimate about 10 boats per day use the boat ramp during the week and 20 to 30 boats during weekends. The rental canoes and fishing boats at Snook Haven are booked most weekends throughout the year.

Becky's Bait employees indicate that the period of most activity at their facility is Sundays from January to June. Approximately 25 to 30 boats use the fuel and ramp facilities on weekends in the winter and spring, but activity decreases to 10 to 20 boats in the summer and fall months. Fishing and pleasure boating are the major recreational activities at Becky's Bait.

Using the information gathered from the survey, observations, and interviews with private facility operators and those knowledgeable about the river, certain recreational patterns are apparent. The majority of people who frequently use the river tend to participate in various types of recreation. Although people may participate in one or two recreational activities more frequently, many take advantage of the other recreational activities that the river offers. Approximately 45 percent of those surveyed participate in at least four different recreational activities.

People who have smaller fishing boats and canoes tend to use the upper part of the Myakka River, while larger more powerful pleasure craft tend to stay in the downstream area of the river. The reasons for this seem to be due primarily to the natural features and resultant physical limitations of the river. As described in Section 2.0, the northern portion of the river is narrow and shallow with large marsh areas, except for Upper Myakka Lake and Lower Myakka Lake, which is wide but shallow with floating vegetation. The southern portion of the river tends to be wider and deeper with more open water.

The Myakka River State Park is the only public recreational area along the river that offers non-river-dependent recreational activities. People who participate in activities such as hiking, camping, and picnicking use the state park facilities. These same people also tend to participate in river-related recreational activities in the northern portions of the river.

To summarize the analysis of the informational survey, several important conclusions are apparent. The river has three distinct segments: the state park area of lakes, the midstream area, and the downstream southern area. The frequency of use and types of use vary significantly between segments. The segments have different facilities available and, accordingly, are used differently.

The northern segment of the river lacks the private river-related facilities that the southern segment has. This is due in large part to lack of access and natural restrictions to varied boating use. The southern segment has adequate private river-related facilities and considerable boat traffic, but does not have any public river- and non river-dependent facilities.