Much of Florida’s distinctive character lies in the beauty of its natural features, especially its coastlines. Few areas can boast such varied and fascinating meetings of the land and sea. This natural beauty has always been one of Florida’s major attractions for both tourists and residents. Ironically, the very features that have drawn people to Florida are potentially endangered by the increased population pressures.

To protect these distinctive natural features for the enjoyment of future generations, the Florida Legislature created aquatic preserves. The first aquatic preserve was established in Estero Bay in 1966, the result of an increased environmental awareness among Florida citizens in the early 1960s. By 1975 the Florida Aquatic Preserve Act was passed and the existing preserves were brought under a standard set of management criteria.

Aquatic preserves are submerged lands of exceptional beauty which are to be maintained in their natural or existing conditions. All but five of these 42 preserves are located on the coast in the shallow waters of estuaries and the continental shelf. Estuaries are protected nearshore waters, such as bays and lagoons, where fresh and salt water mix. Their unique environmental conditions create very delicate and productive ecosystems. Various types of marine organisms spend all or part of their life cycles in these estuaries, forming fragile communities in which the complete dependence between plants and animals is crucial to the survival of all the species involved.

Of the five freshwater preserves, three are located on rivers and two are on lakes. These freshwater habitats are just as beautiful and dynamic as their saltwater counterparts. As in estuarine systems the diverse organisms that live in rivers and lakes require a delicately balanced ecosystem in order to maintain a healthy environment.

The management objectives for the preserves are to maintain and improve existing resources such as seagrasses, mangroves, aquatic plants, birds, and fish. Only through careful preservation of these essential resources can the public’s continued enjoyment of such activities as boating, swimming, and fishing be insured.
Seagrasses are a prominent feature of the preserves. They are flowering plants that, because of their need for light, live under relatively shallow water. Seagrasses are important to the overall environment for several reasons. They provide oxygen necessary for all animal life. They help maintain water clarity and stabilize the bottom sediment. They also provide habitats and protection for all kinds of sea life. Some organisms attach to their leaves while some live in their root systems, providing food for the larger fish and birds.

Cultural resources are also important in the management of aquatic preserves. Beginning with the original inhabitants, rivers, lakes and ocean waters have always been important in providing food, water, travel and communication. It is clear that aboriginal populations existed along stream meanders and in estuaries where food was plentiful and easily accessible. Campsites, debris middens, along with artifacts such as pottery sherds and food remains have been found in aquatic preserves. In time, more such resources will be located and thus help to enrich the knowledge of Florida's early cultural and environmental history.

Present generations must help preserve and protect these fragile resources to insure their continued existence in Florida's future.

Similar habitat and protection are provided by mangroves, a type of tree that has adapted to living in or near saltwater. There are four species of mangroves found in Florida; the red, white, black and buttonwood mangroves. Many shore birds such as pelicans and roseate spoonbills find nesting areas in mangrove forests and islands. In addition to sheltering other marine life, mangroves minimize erosion and filter upland runoff. They also serve as a buffer that protects uplands from storm winds and waves.
AQUATIC PRESERVES

1. Alligator Harbor
2. Apalachicola Bay
3. Banana River
4. Biscayne Bay — Cape Florida-Monroe County
5. Biscayne Bay — Card Sound
6. Big Bend Seagrasses
7. Boca Ciega Bay
8. Cape Haze
9. Cape Romano — Ten Thousand Islands
10. Cockroach Bay
11. Coupon Bight
12. Estero Bay
13. Ft. Clinch State Park
14. Ft. Pickens
15. Gasparilla Sound — Charlotte Harbor
16. Guana River Marsh
17. Indian River — Malabar to Vero Beach
18. Indian River — Vero Beach to Ft. Pierce
19. Jensen Beach to Jupiter Inlet
20. Lake Jackson
21. Lake Weir
22. Lemon Bay
23. Lignumvitae Key
24. Loxahatchee River — Lake Worth Creek
25. Matlacha Pass
26. Mosquito Lagoon
27. Nassau River — St. Johns River Marshes
28. North Fork St. Lucie
29. Oklawaha River
30. Pellicer Creek
31. Pine Island Sound
32. Pinellas County
33. Rainbow Springs
34. Rocky Bayou
35. Roosery Bay
36. St. Andrews Bay
37. St. Joseph Bay
38. St. Martins Marsh
39. Terra Cela
40. Tomoka Marsh
41. Wekiva River
42. Yellow River Marsh
Department of Natural Resources
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