

# Captiva's water quality: Putting science first

Submitted on behalf of the Captiva Community Panel

The Captiva Community Panel -- an advisory group to Lee County on land use and zoning issues -- has undertaken a number of islandwide efforts to benefit Captiva. The Panel is the island's official planning organization and catalyst for developing a comprehensive Captiva Plan. Its efforts include:

- Facilitating funding of more than \$1.5 million from Lee County and other governmental entities for numerous Captiva planning and implementation projects.
- Developing the Captiva Plan (part of the countywide Lee Plan governing land use) and drafting Captiva-specific language for the Lee County Land Development Code;
- Securing implementation of the Captiva Drive safety shoulder from the county's Department of Transportation;
- Facilitating the construction of communications tower to improve cell phone use on Captiva;
- Working for creation of a golf-cart zone in the Village area of Captiva, and for passage of rules allowing night-time use of appropriately equipped carts within that area;
- Obtaining six-figure grants for extensive native vegetation planting after Hurricane Charley;
- Providing funding and a forum for the Captiva hurricane committee;
- Providing a public forum for all islandwide land use and zoning issues.

But improving the waters surrounding our island may prove to be the most important achievement of all. We hope all of Captiva will follow the results of the Panel's water quality study closely, and participate in any solutions the data shows we need.

A perceived severe decline in water quality in fall 2007 sparked the temporary close of two Sanibel beaches, and inspired residents of both islands to take a closer look at the conditions of their nearshore waters. The Panel, through its long-standing water quality committee, decided to launch a monitoring study to assess the quality of nearshore waters, identify potential pollutants and their sources, and develop ways to ensure cleaner waters surrounding the island.

To undertake this, the Panel obtained funding from the county's Tourist Development Council (TDC) to support a two-year water quality monitoring effort. Given the tourism value that clean water conveys-- and the damaging headlines sparked by the beach closures in 2007 -- the Panel believed the TDC would agree finding the source of the problem was critical. The Panel partnered with the Sanibel Captiva Conservation Foundation (SCCF) Marine Lab, who developed a monitoring proposal.

In October 2008 the Panel received \$122,925 in Year 1 TDC funding for a water quality study. First, SCCF scientists summarized previous collected water quality data from various organizations into a database.

Lab staff also summarized historical violations for all wastewater treatment plants on Sanibel, Captiva and areas surrounding Pine Island Sound. Based on this, areas of potential concern were identified, sampling points were selected and a monitoring plan was initiated. Sampling began in fall 2008. Despite tight funds, the Panel and SCCF were able to secure an additional \$99,294 in October 2009 to complete the work of identifying potential pollution sources.

The monitoring included results from other concurrent SCCF research efforts, some of which were tied to the Blind Pass opening; sampling was conducted on both the Sound and Gulf sides of the island and areas on the north end of Sanibel and the national wildlife refuge. Full details on the data collected for Year 1 are available online at the Panel Web site, [www.captivacommunitypanel.com](http://www.captivacommunitypanel.com), and have been presented to Captivans at numerous meetings.

Initial results indicate rainfall and associated runoff was a driving force in pushing pollutants into the water. But where were those pollutants generated, and what could reasonably be done about that? That is the focus of Year 2 testing, which will rely on Year 1 data to identify possible sources.

What's the goal? Simply, to keep our island's waters cleaner by doing what we can to lessen the pollutants coming off the island itself. What comes down the river or in from the Gulf is another matter, and something Islanders need to be vigilant about. But water quality has to start in our own backyards, and the Panel hopes this study will provide Captivans with hard data upon which to make decisions to improve nearshore water quality.

The Panel took this approach to put science first; to develop rigorous data and proven facts gathered by respected scientists well versed in the islands; to define actual conditions and then decide what steps should be taken to change this situation. If no further action is necessary, great; if some tough decisions are called for, great -- but, either way, Captivans will have facts to back up whatever comes next.

The Panel welcomes public input and volunteers, and invites you to attend its monthly meetings, typically held on the second Tuesday of the month beginning at 9 a.m. at Tween Waters Inn. More information is available online at [www.captivacommunitypanel.com](http://www.captivacommunitypanel.com).

- The full report is available online at [http://www.captivacommunitypanel.com/pdfs/Year%201%20TDC-CCP%20Captiva%20Water%20Quality%20Assessment%20Project%20Final%203\\_10small.pdf](http://www.captivacommunitypanel.com/pdfs/Year%201%20TDC-CCP%20Captiva%20Water%20Quality%20Assessment%20Project%20Final%203_10small.pdf)