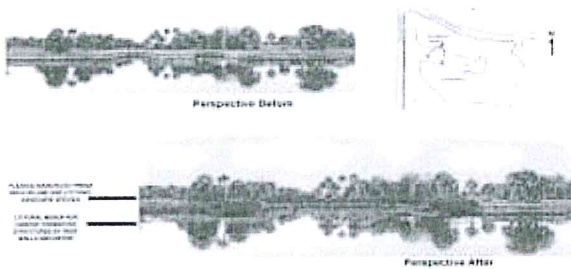




Mercabo Cove groundbreaking on March 1; details explained by GICIA

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SUBMITTED BY THE GICIA – Excitement is building around the Gasparilla Island Conservation and Improvement Association's (GICIA) Mercabo Cove restoration project, which is on schedule to break ground on Sunday, March 1.

Goals for this unique project include long-term benefits such as improved water quality, enhanced fish and bird habitat, reduced seawall maintenance costs and visually enhanced views of the preserve site.

Working with consultants and engineers, the GICIA has developed a basin restoration plan that utilizes several innovative techniques for stabilizing the seawall, enhancing habitat for fish and improving water quality.

Both riprap and structures called reef balls will be placed in front of sections of seawall. Riprap, which consists of various sizes of concrete, will be generated by the removal of portions of the existing sidewalk and seawall cap.

Once installed, it will aid in fortifying the wall while enhancing habitat by providing nooks and crannies for fish and other sealife.

Reef balls, which are hollow, dome-shaped, concrete structures, typically have several holes of varying sizes that provide protected areas for juvenile fish to hide from larger predators. Each reef ball is treated to create a rough surface texture, which promotes settling by marine organisms such as oysters.

The GICIA has ordered 150 various sizes of reef balls that will be strategically placed in front of the existing seawalls. In the shallower areas of the basin, the reef balls will provide habitat for small fish, and during low tides will become partly exposed, providing foraging areas for shorebirds.

The final technique to be used to reinforce the seawall involves the placement of reinforced culvert pipe (RCP). For this project, the GICIA has secured 120 sections of RCP through a generous donation from Alex Feliciano of the Rinker Plant in Fort Myers. For the cove project, the RCP will be installed vertically along sections of seawall so that the top extends out of the water. The pipe is then filled with soil, making it a giant planter, and mangroves are planted. As the mangroves grow and become established, their roots will climb over the tops of the pipe, eventually covering the pipe and the seawall.

Mangroves are extremely important to the marine ecosystem, because their root systems enhance the fisheries habitat and their large canopies create roosting and nesting habitat for birds. Approximately, 900 red, white and black mangroves will be planted as this part of the restoration project.

In the GICIA's effort to take the Cove project beyond merely a shoreline stabilization project to a true restoration, several unique and interesting design elements have been incorporated. One of these will be the creation of a tidal creek that will help water to flush the far eastern portion of the existing canal.

The newly formed connection from the basin to the bay will allow tidal flushing of the Cove, which will help to improve water quality in the entire system.

A second element was recommended by Mote Fisheries Biologist Dr. Locascio, who suggested creating an area within the basin that would mimic a coastal tidal pond. Mangrove-lined tidal areas found along Florida's coasts are often utilized by juvenile snook and tarpon. Dr. Locascio worked with our engineer to develop plans for an area within the basin that will be shallow around the outside and slightly deeper in the middle.

The shallower edges will be planted with mangroves, and the entrance will be designed to be accessible only during higher-than-usual tides.

The idea of working to create an area that will be important to the survival of locally important sportfish is extremely exciting, especially since this type of habitat is disappearing all along our coast due to development.

The GICIA is grateful for the extremely generous support of the Boca Grande community. The upland restoration has been successful, and the completion of the Cove

project will improve water quality and provide extremely valuable habitat for fish, birds, manatees, dolphins and the endangered smalltooth sawfish.

“To everyone who generously supported the GICIA in purchasing and restoring this site, thank you,” said GICIA President Bruce Carbonari.

If you have any questions about this exciting project, please call the GICIA office at 964-2667.

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