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New Report Details Threats To, Ways To Save Texas Bays

AUSTIN, Texas - Texas bays and estuaries teeter on the brink of a challenging future, according to a new report that reviews past and present threats and suggests options to protect bays in the future.

The report notes that the Texas coastal zone is home to one out of every three Texans, two of the nation's largest ports, and one of the nation's longest coastlines. Two-thirds of Texas drains to the coast.

"The Texas coast's ecological richness rivals its size and fuels the state's economy to the tune of billions of dollars," said Larry McKinney, Ph.D., and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department coastal fisheries director. "However, that ecological richness and economic productivity are challenged by future threats that need to be addressed."

McKinney said a state population on track to double in the next few decades will increase the pressure on water resources that are a fundamental element to the health and productivity of Texas bays. Conservation scientists and others are concerned that the state's growing population, especially on the coast, will increase the pressure to convert homes for fish and wildlife to homes for people, and will increase the amounts of runoff pollution from developed lands.

"Between the ecological health of the coast and the growing threats to its health lies the need to engage all Texans in stewardship of coastal ecosystems," McKinney said.

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department collaborated with Texas Sea Grant to publish "Texas Coastal Ecosystems: Past, Present and Future." The report sets the stage by describing in detail the state's coastal region and trends in critical coastal habitats like wetlands and seagrasses. It then focuses on five critical issues for Texas bays - water quantity and quality, protection of natural habitats (particularly those affected by urban development), unique economic development opportunities like birding, and effective communication and outreach to coastal residents.

"In recent years, Texans have seen the mouth of the once-proud Rio Grande go completely dry," said Dave Buzan, TPWD coastal studies team leader, who co-authored the report with McKinney and former TPWD scientist Dan Moulton. "Will we work together to find ways to make sure other rivers continue to flow to the coast?"

The report outlines Smart Growth and the Preservation 2000/Florida Forever program as approaches to proactively minimizing coastal habitat loss while meeting development needs. Ecotourism development such as birding is outlined as a positive economic engine for coastal communities. The report says birding tourism generated more than \$100 million in economic impact for the lower Rio Grande Valley in 1997.

"Environment-based education is important," Buzan said. "It not only helps students understand ecosystems but is showing student improvements in reading, language and math. It's a way for students to master academic skills and make connections that lead to higher-level thinking."

Limited copies of the report are available from Texas Parks and Wildlife Department by contacting Buzan at david.buzan@tpwd.state.tx.us or (512) 912-7013.