

MEDIA CONTACT:
Wit Tuttell at 800-822-6461
or 727-464-7200
wit@FloridasBeach.com

“NATURAL FLORIDA” THRIVES
ON FLORIDA’S BEACH

CLEARWATER, FL -- One of the biggest surprises awaiting many visitors to Florida’s Beach is the vast wealth of natural attractions found in this urban resort area. While known for its sunshine and hospitality, the area has received national and international recognition as a leader in nature-based tourism and environmental management. Nature-based attractions range from wildlife preserves, to the largest wild bird hospital in the United States, to a marine rescue facility, to one of the most extensive park systems in Florida.

In a state noted for theme parks, “natural Florida” is alive and well among the 26 communities that make up Florida’s Beach. Here are some of the many nature-based opportunities available in Florida’s Beach starting with Pinellas County Government’s two major environmentally related attractions, Brooker Creek Preserve and Weedon Island Preserve.

Brooker Creek is an 8,500-acre wildlife preserve in the northern section of the county near Tarpon Springs. Currently, the preserve offers free nature hikes on weekends and features a scenic 6-mile horseback trail. Included in the development will be a series of boardwalks and hiking trails enabling residents, school groups and visitors to enjoy the many natural habitats available on this pristine piece of land including animals, birds, plants and wildflowers.

Also included will be a \$6 million, 12,000-square foot environmental education center. Initial plans call for an IMAX-style theater, herbarium, dorm for visiting professors/researchers and research library. The center will give visitors an educational and entertaining look at Florida’s environment. The theater would teach visitors what it feels like to stand in the middle of a forest fire or spend the night in a cypress swamp. Plans call for the four-building complex to be completed by October 2002.

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Weedon Island Preserve combines a wonderful nature experience with a Native-American cultural center. Weedon Island's 4-mile canoe trail, boardwalk and observation tower reopened recently after a \$3.2 million renovation. A 9-mile hiking trail and additional boardwalk showcases and protects the natural beauty and wildlife aspects of the preserve, along with a fishing pier and waterfront picnic sites.

The county is working with the Smithsonian Institution and a national advisory board of Native-American and other historical experts to build a Native-American cultural center. The center will showcase the Indian civilization which once inhabited this series of islands. The center will combine a look at some of the many artifacts excavated from the site by the Smithsonian in the 1940s, as well as the chance to experience aspects of native-American culture including dance, cooking, art, crafts and more. The design phase for the center is underway.

Visitors don't have to wait for the completion of these projects to enjoy the beauty of natural Florida. Practically every **water activity** imaginable is available on Florida's Beach including: deep-sea fishing; backwater salt flats fishing (rated as some of the best in Florida); boating and sailing; canoeing and sea kayaking; SCUBA diving (dive shops offer daily trips to numerous wrecks, artificial reefs and freshwater dives to area springs and rivers); wind surfing; shelling; and exploring some of the top-rated beaches in the entire country.

The 1999 beach survey by Dr. Stephen Leatherman of Florida International University finds Florida's Beach leads the country in great beaches with Caladesi Island State Park ranked #6 and Fort De Soto Park #7 -- out of 650 beaches surveyed. Clearwater Beach also rated at the #1 city beach in the Gulf Region. No other single destination can offer three top public beaches. The area also recently completed a \$22 million beach renourishment adding tons of sand from the Tampa Bay channel to beaches from Redington Beach to Sand Key Park.

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Several operators offer **nature-related boat cruises** and dolphin watch cruises with trained experts explaining the many points of interest. Boat cruises are also available to Egmont Key State Wildlife Preserve and Anclote Key Wildlife Preserve, two chances to experience nature and history on pristine barrier islands.

Hiking trails exist in several locations throughout the area. The 37-mile long Pinellas Trail is one of the longest linear parks in the southeastern United States. It enables visitors and residents alike to have a wonderful opportunity for biking, in-line skating, jogging and walking -- all without the safety concerns of being in automobile traffic. More rugged natural hiking trails exist in several parks and are excellent vehicles for seeing abundant plant and animal life. Off-road cycling is allowed at some of these trails and bike rental shops are frequent.

Florida's Beach is the birding capital of Florida. Every fall the area hosts the annual Florida Birding Festival & Nature Expo, one of the largest birdwatching festivals in the nation. Participants have the opportunity to see 19 "state-listed" bird species including the Reddish Egret, the rarest heron in North America, and the Florida Scrub-Jay, the only bird species unique to Florida.

In addition to the festival, Brooker Creek was selected the first site in the country as "An Important Bird Education Area" by the American Bird Conservancy. Shell Key, an undeveloped barrier island in the area, was named one of the five most important areas in Florida for wintering and nesting sea birds and shore birds.

The area's **parks** serve as a showcase of diverse ecosystems, ranging from wide stretches of white sand and amber sea oats along the Gulf of Mexico, to stands of pine, cypress and mangrove, and inland trails weaving through jungle-like hammocks.

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The County operates 22 parks encompassing 4,345 acres. The area also offers Honeymoon Island and Caladesi Island, state recreation areas near Dunedin, and the county is developing four new parks and expanding the Pinellas Trail to 125 miles. The parks are havens for wildlife photographers, sun seekers, family picnics and recreational activities like bicycling, boating, camping, canoeing and swimming.

A special sense of adventure surrounds **Fort De Soto Park** and Honeymoon and Caladesi Islands. Located south of St. Petersburg, Fort De Soto Park features campsites directly on the Gulf of Mexico, a historic fort, fishing piers and seven miles of undeveloped beaches ranked as the seventh best beach in the United States.

The 235-site camping area includes water and electrical hook-ups that can accommodate trailers and recreational vehicles. Fort De Soto, built in 1898 to protect Tampa Bay during the Spanish American War, is listed in the National Register of Historic Places and counts Ponce de Leon and Robert E. Lee among its distinguished visitors.

Honeymoon Island and Caladesi Island provide nearly 1,000 acres that appear much as they did in the 1500s when the Spanish first explored the area. The Dunedin Causeway connects the mainland with Honeymoon Island, but Caladesi, rated as the sixth best beach in the United States, is accessible only by boat. Hourly ferry service is available from Honeymoon Island.

The island beaches face the Gulf of Mexico and the bay sides are mangrove swamps, offering refuge for wading and shore birds. Both islands have ridges of virgin pine and oak hammocks. Nature trails wind through the interiors allowing visitors to observe dozens of native plants and animals including osprey, brown pelicans, snowy white egrets, armadillos and raccoons.

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Other Florida's Beach **nature trails** are located at Anderson Park in Tarpon Springs, Lake Seminole Park in Seminole, Sawgrass Lake Park in Pinellas Park and Veterans Memorial Park in Bay Pines. Boyd Hill Nature Trail in St. Petersburg and Moccasin Lake Nature Park in Clearwater are municipal facilities where guided tours are available.

Those wanting to combine nature with historical interests should visit **Philippe Park**, on Old Tampa Bay near Safety Harbor. The park was the site of three distinct settlement periods. The park's large Native American Indian mound is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Hernando De Soto visited the area during his 1539 expedition when he wrote the first known letter from the "new world." Philippe Park is the burial site of French count Odet Philippe who built a plantation there in the 1830s and introduced grapefruit to Florida. Grapefruit trees still grow among the massive live oaks.

Many of the area's parks provide choice locations for **salt and freshwater fishing**. At the mouth of Tampa Bay and the gulf, Fort De Soto Park is noted as a productive spot for a wide range of saltwater fish. Anderson Park and Brooker Creek Park are on Lake Tarpon, a freshwater lake which produced the state record large-mouth bass. Lake Seminole Park is also popular.

Pinellas County government is also developing **Pinewood Cultural Park** to be a 150-acre combination of a cultural, historic and botanical experience in one single destination. Pinewood will be home to the Florida Botanical Gardens, Gulf Coast Art Museum and Heritage Village. The Botanical Gardens are being developed and should be completed by 2002. The 18 distinct gardens will be Florida's largest and include a state-of-the-art botanical learning center. The Museum of Art contains permanent and traveling art collections as well as studios where visitors can work with artists in various media. Both are adjacent to Heritage Village, the county's doorway to the past with 22 historic structures. Admission is free to all attractions.

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Man-made but nature-based attractions on Florida's Beach include the **Suncoast Seabird Sanctuary** and the Clearwater Marine Aquarium. The sanctuary is the busiest wild bird hospital in the country caring for an average of 15-20 sick or injured birds each day. Most are rehabilitated and released back into the wild, but those with permanent injuries are housed at the sanctuary, giving guests an opportunity to see more than 500 wild birds up close.

The **Clearwater Marine Aquarium** is the state-licensed marine rescue facility for this part of Florida. In addition to its rescue operations, the facility rehabilitates a number of marine species and houses a permanent and recovering population of fish, sea turtles, river otters and dolphins. The Aquarium features one- and four-day "Marine Life Adventures" where visitors team with marine biologists to study endangered animal and plant species. The adventures are customized for all members of the family with excursions ranging from snorkeling to behind-the-scenes tours or just beach combing. Staff guided tours, kayak adventures and Sea Life Safari Cruises also are available.

Visitors searching for "Natural Florida" will find opportunities galore on Florida's Beach. The most surprising part is that it is all located within an urban setting well known for world-class resorts, museums and numerous other attractions.

For more information on Florida's Beach, call 1-877-FL-BEACH (352-3224) in the U.S. and Canada, or 1-727-464-7200 internationally. Take a virtual visit to the area on the internet at www.FloridasBeach.com, or write to: St. Petersburg/Clearwater Area Convention & Visitors Bureau, 14450 46th Street North, Suite 108, Clearwater, FL 33762.

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