

County official: Vandalism at Oslo Road boat ramp malicious

BY: Tyler Treadway tyler.treadway@tcpalm.com 772-221-4219

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Vandalism at the Oslo Road boat ramp Saturday night appeared to be planned, malicious and pointless.

Vandals dumped oil in the water and scattered broken glass and nails in the parking lot at the ramp on the Indian River Lagoon in southern Indian River County. The oil had spread over about 100 square feet in the water off the ramp by the time the damage was discovered early Sunday morning by an Indian River County Sheriff's deputy.

No permanent damage to structures at the site was found, said Mike Zito, assistant Indian River County administrator.

County crews cleaned up the site Sunday morning, picking up the glass and nails and soaking up the oil with towels and a special absorbent material, Zito said.

Crews were back at the scene Monday morning to make sure all the oil had been removed.

Richard Baker, president of the Pelican Island chapter of the Audubon Society said the quick action by county crews apparently prevented any lasting environmental damage.

"I can't say for sure there was absolutely no damage to the environment," Baker said. "There was still a fine sheen on the water when I saw it Monday morning. But it could have been a lot worse if the county hadn't cleaned it up so well."

The ramp has been controversial for several years as the county has pursued a nearly \$1 million project to dredge muck out of the boat channel leading into the lagoon and pave the parking lot.

Environmentalists led by the Audubon chapter have fought the project, claiming it would harm sea grass beds in environmentally sensitive breeding grounds for snook, redfish, tarpon and sea trout. Proponents of the project said it would improve the ecology at the site by eliminating runoff from the dirt road and parking lot into the lagoon.

The issue caused several long and heated Indian River County Commission meetings until October, when commissioners agreed in a 3-2 vote to delay the project three to five years.

The controversy reared up again in March when it was learned county officials were still pursuing a permit for the project despite the commission-ordered delay.

"This incident seems different from typical vandalism," Zito said. "Usually you have some kids who do some random damage: destroy a bathroom or a toilet at a park. Here you had a definite motivation to inconvenience ramp users. These people thought ahead and brought oil, glass and nails with them. It's a higher level of vandalism because there's more malice, more forethought."

Baker said the vandalism "doesn't make any sense. I can't see what kind of statement someone would be trying to make by maliciously doing something like this."

County Commissioner Tim Zorc, who voted for the project delay, said the vandalism "obviously was no accident. An accident is a single nail or a single broken bottle. I've been trying to figure out what would motivate someone to do something like this, and I'm drawing a blank. If you're upset at the boaters using the ramp, you don't damage the environment."

Because there was no physical damage, Zito said the cost to taxpayers is limited to "a few hours of overtime and some material to absorb the oil. It would be in the hundreds of dollars, certainly not over \$1,000."

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