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Death of manatees, Indian River Lagoon: Too much land grass, not enough in water | Opinion

Richard Baker Guest columnist

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Growing up in Hayfield, Minnesota, a small rural town, I walked from my house to woods and rivers to catch fish and watch them spawning in the creeks.

As a Boy Scout, age 12, I took the first of many 10-day canoe trips to Quetico Provincial Park, in Ontario, Canada, where we could fish and see varied wildlife like moose, deer, black bears, beaver and birds. Motorboats were not allowed. I have loved the outdoors and appreciated nature all my life.

The Pelican Island Audubon Society is trying to give our children the experience of nature — Florida's rapidly disappearing paradise. For six years we have provided fifth-graders from four Title I elementary schools and summer and spring teenager camps, a kayaking experience from the Indian River Lagoon's Oslo Road boat ramp and helped clean spoil islands.

The youngsters identify birds at Sebastian Inlet State Park, our stormwater and wastewater plants, and hike the Oslo Riverfront Conservation Area's fresh and saltwater wetlands, hammock, and scrub trails.

Development has removed native trees and plants, causing our lagoon to die and deplete seagrass. Thus, this year alone, with nothing to eat over 700 manatees have died; more are starving. Manatees need a food bank during this emergency.

Why are we losing seagrass? Chemicals from fertilizers, paint, medicine and pesticides from lawns, septic tanks and broken sewage pipes enter the lagoon as stormwater, wastewater and reclaimed water.

For the first time in 40 years, I was shocked to see thick amounts of smelly, mucky Cyanobacteria in the water when we took our summer campers to the Oslo Road boat ramp to go kayaking. It was horrible!

I canceled the kayaking there to avoid exposing them to possible cyanobacterial toxins they might inhale or pick up on their bodies. Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute took samples and found that *Lyngbya* was the dominant bacterial species, which produces a toxin that can cause skin and respiratory issues such as itchy rashes, irritation and redness.

Here's an easy solution to save our manatees, fish, birds, other animals and us in our lagoon and planet: Remove your grass and plant native trees and plants that don't require fertilizers and pesticides.

The Pelican Island Audubon Society's goal? Plant 100,000 native trees and plants and reduce the lawns responsible for polluting our lagoon and killing the animals and plants with fertilizers and chemicals.

In two years, we've distributed over 8,000 native trees and plants through our Trees for Life/Plants for Birds project and mapped locations on our website. PIAS is working to make it easy and inexpensive for you to bring native landscaping to your yard. These small steps will turn your yard into a native paradise attracting wildlife and saving the lagoon and you money!

Alachua County received grants to pay homeowners to get rid of their grass (Turf Swap). It's cheaper to pay folks to remove their lawns than consume 64% to 80% of their drinking water to irrigate their lawns.

Alachua also has a tougher fertilizer ordinance that prohibits all fertilizer applications for eight months versus only four in Indian River County. Let's stop all phosphorus fertilizers sales for lawns. They're not needed.

Brevard County citizens taxed themselves a half cent sales tax for significant projects to help the lagoon. With significant transparency and public oversight all new homes and buildings should have only 15% of the land in grass, with the rest in native plants.

Let's plant 100,000 natives. Ask your elected officials to forbid grass and chemicals in our yards.

We need less grass on land and more grass in the lagoon to save manatees, make the lagoon safe for our kids and have healthy fish we can catch and eat.

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