FISH OUT OF WATER

THE INDIAN RIVER LAND TRUST WORKS WITH LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS TO BRING THE LAGOON INSIDE THE VERO BEACH MUSEUM OF ART.

WRITTEN BY MELISSA KAREN SANCES

Artist James Prosek is pleased his work may inspire conversation and conservation. Prosek specializes in painting fish like this grouper life size.
When the Indian River Land Trust learned that paintings of life-size fish would be displayed at the Vero Beach Museum of Art, they proposed an idea to make the fish even more realistic - and bring the lagoon to life. With the help of Bonefish & Tarpon Trust and the Florida Institute of Technology, the Land Trust installed a 550-gallon, 5,000-pound aquarium in the museum’s Buck Atrium where fish indigenous to the Indian River Lagoon will live for the duration of the James Prosek - Ocean Fishes exhibit. The show opened on June 6 and will continue until September 6.

“You would be surprised,” says Ann Taylor, director of marketing and philanthropy for the Land Trust. “but there are a lot of people who live in this town who never really get to experience the lagoon or the beach or water in general, so this tank is really a tool to say that the lagoon lives and breathes.”

It’s also one of 25 ways that the Land Trust, which preserves nearly nine miles of shoreline and 1,000 acres of land along the Indian River Lagoon, is giving back to the community in honor of their 25th anniversary. At their annual benefit last November, the organization asked its members to support a number of

This mixed media painting of the Atlantic bonito is one of 22 ocean fishes featured in the James Prosek exhibit.
The collaboration with the museum, F.I.T. and Bonefish seemed like a no-brainer. "One of the reasons we chose this project is most of our properties are coastal wetlands, and one of our focuses is restoring those wetlands," says David Heuberger, director of land protection for the Indian River Land Trust. "There are some very important fish in the lagoon that require the types of wetlands that we've been protecting and restoring. It also goes nicely with a project at Bee Gum Point where we're studying the same fish and their utilization of these wetlands."

But executing the idea took a lot of thoughtful planning. A month before the museum exhibit opened, David and Stewardship Project Manager Julie Hanson joined Dr. Aaron Adams, director of operations at Bonefish & Tarpon Trust and research associate professor at the Florida Institute of Technology, and Dr. Jonathan Shenker, associate professor of marine biology at F.I.T., along with some of his graduate students, at Bee Gum Point.

The 110-acre site off of Fred R. Tuerk Drive looks jungle-like
The drone has better-than-human vision and can see deep beneath the surface to help the scientists determine how productive a nursery Bee Gum is and how they can create habitats to increase its productivity.

next to the manicured entrance to John’s Island. “A lot of people think that it’s just scrub on the side of the road,” said Dr. Shenker, who led the team that day in two-person kayaks through tunnels of thick brush to get to otherwise obscured open water teeming with juvenile snook and tarpon.

As part of the group’s expedition, graduate student James King guided a drone over murky brown water thick with seagrass. The drone has better-than-human vision and can see deep beneath the surface to help the scientists determine how productive a nursery Bee Gum is – and how they can create habitats to increase its productivity.

Nearby, graduate student Anthony Cianciotto installed antennae which will allow the scientists to track fish. “These mangrove marshes in general are incredibly important nurseries for tarpon, snook and a wide variety of other species,” said Dr. Shenker, “and whatever we can do to increase the value of these nurseries can only benefit our fisheries.”

“It takes a special kind of person to want to muck around in a mangrove swamp,” joked Dr. Adams, who explained that next to water quality issues, habitat management is the most important issue related to the lagoon’s preservation. “The state recreational fishery economic impact every year is about $8 billion, and that
James painted this 12-and-a-half-foot great white shark exclusively for the exhibit at the Vero Beach Museum of Art. To date it is the largest life-size fish he has ever painted. Someday he hopes to paint a larger great white or a whale.
only happens if there are healthy habitats. For a lot of people that's really abstract unless they're actually out there mucking around. So with the display at the museum people can actually see what's going on.

Today the aquarium is a mini-estuary and the museum's atrium is a contained outdoor classroom, where habitat maps and life-cycle information are on display alongside the tank. "Seven of the fish featured in the James Prosek exhibit occur in the Indian River Lagoon for some or all of their life cycles, and we're looking at how the different habitats play a role in the fishes' life cycles," explains David.

"We're excited for our visitors to see the connection between these works of art and what's going on in our environment," says Marshall Adams, director of education at the museum, who took a special class at the Smithsonian Marine Station at Fort Pierce to display the fish, as well as oversee feeding and general upkeep. He can't recall a time in the museum's history when such elaborate and exciting measures were taken in the name of art and environmental education.

"Art museums aren't used to dealing with the reality of live

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The 550-gallon tank installed in the museum by the Indian River Land Trust complements James’ life-size ocean fishes with live fish from the Indian River Lagoon. The installation was just one of 25 ways the Land Trust gave back to the community this year in honor of their 25th anniversary.

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animals," he says. "That is pretty unique, for any art museum anywhere!" Both Marshall and David had to be certified to handle the fish, and Dr. Adams and Dr. Shenker and his students provided a wealth of information for the display.

While the tank sits in the atrium easily accessible to the museum's summer campers, the exhibit is displayed in the Titelman and Schumann galleries. Twenty-two life-size mixed media paintings of ocean fishes portray snook, tarpon, grouper, red snapper, sailfish - and a 12-and-a-half-foot great white shark, created especially for the show.

The only great white shark in the museum is wall-bound, but the Land Trust and its partnering organizations hope that the live local fish in the atrium will inspire the museum's patrons, particularly the children. "That's where it starts," says Dr. Adams. "You get old like me and people are set in their ways, but the kids absorb a lot. They can help to educate their parents and grandparents who might not have that exposure. We have kids who educate their parents who might even be fishermen. They'll learn through interacting with the Land Trust and the next thing you know they're telling their dad who's a fishing guide about this new information. The more education we can get out there, the better." 

The Indian River Lagoon is teeming with snook. As juvenile fish, snook enjoy the lagoon's unique seagrass habitat.

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