

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.

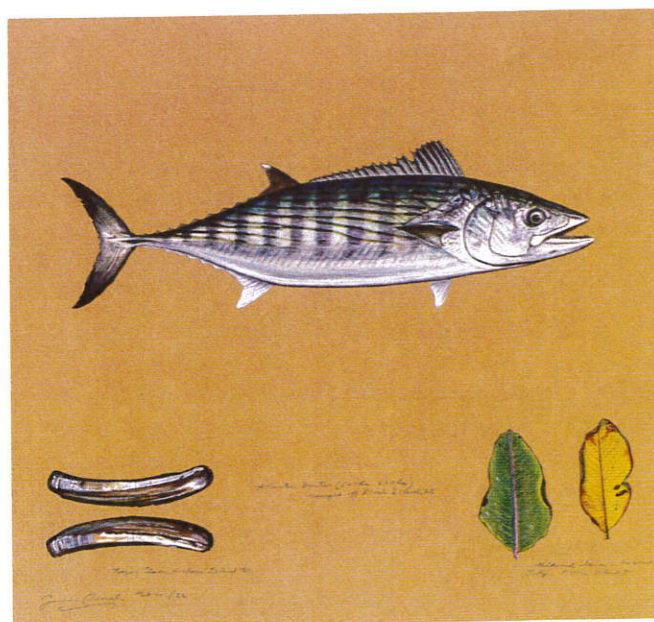


Tarpon are prevalent in the Indian River Lagoon and are represented in the 550-gallon tank installed by the Indian River Land Trust - with the help of the Florida Institute of Technology and Bonefish & Tarpon Trust - at the Vero Beach Museum of Art as part of the James Prosek - Ocean Fishes exhibit. "There are some very important fish in the lagoon that require the types of wetlands that we've been protecting and restoring," says David Heuberger, director of land protection for the Indian River Land Trust. The tank brings those fishes and their habitat to life.

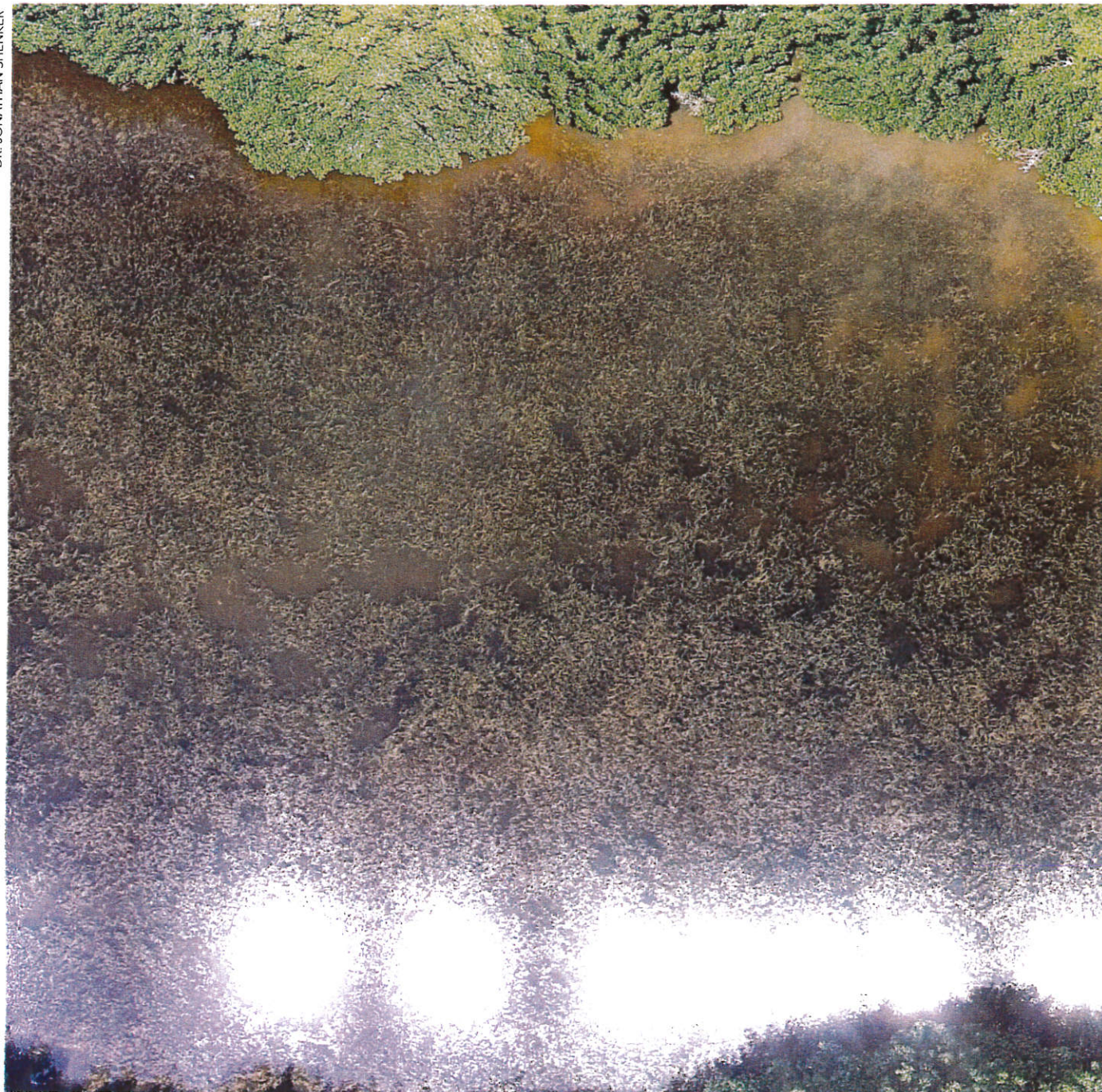
When the Indian River Land Trust learned that paintings of life-size fish would be displayed at the Vero Beach Museum of Art, they proposed an idea to make the fish even more realistic - and bring the lagoon to life. With the help of Bonefish & Tarpon Trust and the Florida Institute of Technology, the 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.



This aerial view of Bee Gum Point, a 110-acre site preserved by the Indian River Land Trust, was taken by a drone flown by graduate student James King of the Florida Institute of Technology. King, along with F.I.T. faculty Dr. Jonathan Shenker and Dr. Aaron Adams, as well as David Heuberger and Julie Hanson of the Indian River Land Trust, kayaked out to open water where they awaited the drone's video feed.

projects including community events, beautification projects and larger stewardship projects.

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.

Snook and Tarpon Utilization of Our Indian River Lagoon

The Snook

Cynoscion nebulosus

Spook spawn in summer, mostly at the mouth of lakes and along beaches. This is because fertilization can only occur in waters with salinity greater than 25 parts per thousand.

After spawning two to three weeks in open water, snook larvae metamorphose into small specimens of what we recognize as snook and their search for protected, freshwater mangrove habitat.

Jupiter Inlet
Atlantic Ocean
Wabasco Causeway
Vero Beach
Alma Lee Lay Bridge
St. Lucie County
Indian River County

1950

As snook and tarpon grow, they eat a wider array of estuarine and coastal fishery, eventually using most of our Indian River Lagoon.

The Tarpon

Megascops atlanticus

Tarpon spawn offshore. The likely spawning area for tarpon along the east coast of the US is noted in the blue oval.

After broadcast spawning, tarpon larvae that hatch (shown here) live in the open water at pelagic for 20-30 days.

As tarpon larvae transform, they make their way into freshwater mangrove habitats which they require for the first year of their lives. This tarpon is about 6 months old.

Barbaro Bridge
St. Lucie County
P. Pierce Inlet

1950

Legend:

- Blue Oval: Sea Ostrac
- Green Line: Mangrove
- Red Line: High Salt Marsh
- * Lake Fort Cooper 1962-1969

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"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." ❀



DR. AARON ADAMS

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



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