

cover story

Island waters part of state paddling trail

By CLAUDIA MILLER
Keys Sunday contributor

Kayaking's popularity drives ecotourism options

From barrier island dune systems to salt marsh to mangrove, Florida is host to many diverse coastal ecosystems. There is no better way to intimately explore these environments than by traveling the Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail by kayak.

The idea for the 1,500-mile trail, which begins at Big Lagoon State Park near Pensacola and extends around the Keys ending at Fort Clinch State Park near the Georgia border, was first conceived by environmental lobbyist and paddler David Gluckman in the 1980s. He was inspired by the establishment of the 350-mile Maine Island Trail system, but it wasn't until 2004 that the state finally organized a plan to complete a Florida trail.

"It took a long time for the state to accept that the idea was possible," said Doug Alderson, the field director for the FCSPT under the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Office of Greenways and Trails.

He said that they first became motivated when the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission mapped out the Big Bend Saltwater Paddling Trail, which was from the Aucilla River to the Suwannee.

"When that was successful, I think they realized that the interest in kayaking had become high enough to where this trail could be popular and people



Photo by floridapaddling.com

Bill Burnham paddles toward one of the old East Coast Railway bridges in the Keys.

could volunteer to help manage it," Alderson said. "Kayaking in general and kayaking in Florida reached a critical mass. If they had started in 1980, I don't think that there would have been nearly as much interest as today."

In fact, statistics show that kayaking as a sport has grown exponentially over the past years. The Outdoor Industry Association in conjunction with

the National Sporting Goods Association reports that kayaking participation in the United States increased 117 percent between 1995 and 2005 from 3.5 million to 7.6 million people.

Alderson said that kayaking has grown in popularity because of new lightweight designs and the suitability of the sport for people of many different abilities.

"Today, a kayak weighs 25 pounds where a few years ago it might have weighed 50 to 60," he said. "You can get into a kayak and take a day paddle near the shore, or you can head out for a seven-day trip. It's even becoming popular with the elderly population."

In the fall of 2004, Alderson started scouting the FCSPT. He began by building on the efforts of local communities that had

already built their own trails. "A lot of counties had started doing their own blueways," he said. "I plugged right into some of their efforts. They had started just recently — early in this decade. The timing was perfect for all of the aspects to come together."

The Florida Keys Overseas Heritage Trail, which extends from Key Largo to Key West, is one of the segments that Alderson was able to tap into.

Monica Woll, the trail specialist for the Heritage Trail under the FDEP Office of Greenways and Trails, said that she remembers going to organizational meetings for the local trail as far back as 10 years ago.

"My husband and I own a kayak shop in Key Largo, Florida Bay Outfitters," she said. "It was just an idea that we had back then to try and go to the park management and get something established. It was in our spare time, and nobody would listen to us half of the time. It was a grassroots effort."

She said that things started to come together when organizers from the Overseas Heritage Trail, which is a recreational greenway still under construction for hiking, running, bicycling and in-line skating, wanted to incorporate their work and add paddling to their project.

Bill and Mary Burnham spent a great deal of time scouting the trail from 2003 to 2007 while researching their book *The Florida Keys Paddling Atlas*.

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