

# FOLLOWING THE *Big Bend Shellfish Trail* IN FLORIDA

## *The Place*

Located where the Florida peninsula meets the panhandle, the Big Bend region is one of the least developed and pristine stretches of coastline in the United States. Seagrass meadows abound offshore, while salt marshes, oyster bars, and tidal creeks dominate inshore. These habitats provide essential near-shore nurseries for commercial and recreational species. A mix of federal and state-owned uplands provide a significant buffer to encroaching development.

## *The Shellfish*

The Big Bend is one of the most productive areas for marine shellfish in the Gulf of Mexico. An important facet of the region's heritage, shellfish harvest has a long history. Harvest of oysters was prevalent among Native American cultures and shell middens can be found throughout the coast. During the 1800s, maritime economies prospered in towns such as Cedar Key, Suwannee, Horseshoe Beach, and Steinhatchee.

Commercial shellfisheries for bay scallops, blue and stone crabs, shrimp, and oysters reached peak production in the 1900s but have since declined or given way to recreational fisheries. Many of these towns still harbor local shellfisheries and are examples of working waterfronts where harvesters carry on the traditions of past generations. Aquaculture of hard clams is now an important aspect of present-day economies.

## *The Map*

A study conducted by The Conservation Fund on Big Bend's economy highlighted the critical link between the land and waters and its economic health. The Fund created a grant program in 2016 to enhance this connection. The diverse shellfish resources of the region were recognized through a grant award. In partnership with tourist development councils in four coastal counties, a map was developed to guide visitors where to buy, eat, and, sometimes, harvest fresh shellfish.

Over 95 shellfish vendors, restaurants, seafood markets, marinas, bait & tackle shops are identified. The map provides information on the shellfisheries and aquaculture industries, as well as actions to take in protecting water quality and habitat for these industries. Promotion of the trail and distribution of 200,000 paper maps has resulted in the launch of a new tourism initiative.

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## *The Trail*

The map of local businesses was expanded in 2019 to an actual trail, which visitors can follow and become informed about the shellfisheries while experiencing the ambience of working waterfronts along the way. With National Maritime Heritage Grant Program funding, twenty-six interpretive signs serve as points of interest in six communities and convey cultural and historical information about the shellfish harvested there.

An interactive website provides information on signage locations, suggested road trips, shellfish infographics, recreational and commercial harvesting, water quality importance, recipes, and more. The top content pages indicate that website visitors are most often accessing information to help them plan their visit and interact with the physical trail. The educational signage and companion website are important vehicles in creating a comprehensive shellfish-themed heritage area.



Visit the website  
**[floridashellfishtrail.org](http://floridashellfishtrail.org)**  
for a downloadable brochure, map,  
itineraries, and self-guided tours



## *Summary*

The Big Bend Shellfish Trail, the largest recreational tourism trail of its kind in the United States, has the potential of being a valuable public educational tool that will simultaneously enhance the authenticity and sustainability of the destinations as well as being economically beneficial for the working waterfront communities in the region.

