

ENHANCING AN ESTUARY-BASED COMMUNITY: FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO WATER MANAGEMENT IN FLORIDA'S ROOKERY BAY ESTUARY

Bruce Lilyea and Jorge Rice, Nova Southeastern University

As a sequel to Lilyea and Rice's (2014) Social Coast Forum presentation entitled; "Linking stakeholders' attitudes to water management in Florida's Rookery Bay estuary; A research study overview" that described the research design, this presentation will describe findings and discuss the implications and recommendations of the completed qualitative research study. The study was commissioned by the Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (RBNERR) to inform its management of the Henderson Creek/Rookery Bay watershed in southwest Florida in a manner that contributes to the restoration of the Rookery Bay Estuary and was a part of the Restoring Rookery Bay Estuary project (RRBE). The research was supported in part by a National Estuarine Research Reserve System's Science Collaborative grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. This social science research project was conducted as an instrumental case study (Creswell, 2013), with the goal of enhancing the RBNERR's capacity to work collaboratively with community stakeholders in their watershed management efforts.

The purpose of this case study was threefold;

1. to understand attitudes and behaviors related to water usage among residents in the RBNERR watershed;
2. to explore community members' interest and experience in engaging in water-related decision-making in personal and professional contexts; and
3. to describe community members' experiences of receiving and responding to information about water-related issues.

Potential participants had to meet the following inclusion criteria:

- 18 years of age and older
- Lives or works in the RBNERR watershed area
- Able to speak and understand English
- Express willingness to participate

15 participants were interviewed via in-depth, qualitative interviews. The participants were divided roughly in half between two categories; diverse community stakeholder groups and those directly engaged in water management decision-making at the agency and governmental levels. Data analysis followed the standards for qualitative case studies and included two cycles of coding (Saldana, 2013), followed by the development of themes. The findings are organized by a summary of the individual participant's perspectives followed by thematic results related to the objectives presented above. Study findings will contribute to the development of collaborative problem-solving approaches addressing local water issues and to the design of public educational initiatives related to water conservation and water management in the RBNERR watershed. Twenty-one themes emerged from the data and were grouped into the following four primary categories; water-related attitudes and beliefs, water-related behaviors and decisions, perceptions and experiences of water management, and receiving water information. The analysis of the findings led to the identification of sixteen implications and recommendations related to the objectives of the RRBE project.