ANALYSIS OF RESTORATION TRADE-OFFS: A CASE STUDY OF CAUSEWAY REMOVAL IN FLORIDA BAY

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Background

Ecosystem restoration entails disturbing the system, yielding ecological effects that the public can perceive as being both positive and negative. Lake Surprise (Key Largo, Florida, USA), is a saline lake located between eastern Florida Bay and southern Biscayne Bay (Figure 1). The lake was bisected in 1906 by a causeway built to support the Flagler Railroad to Key West. The causeway later became the roadbed for the Florida Keys Overseas Highway (U.S. 1). As part of the U.S. 1 widening project, the causeway is scheduled for removal in order to reestablish hydrologic connectivity, improve conditions for the endangered American Crocodile (Crocodylus acutus) and other fauna, and increase access for public recreation.

However, causeway excavation could also impact water quality in the lake and adjacent waters by increasing turbidity and nutrient (N and P) loading. This could exacerbate a persistent regional phytoplankton bloom that has peak chlorophyll-a concentrations in Lake Surprise (Figure 2). Effects of excavation on the lake’s submersed aquatic vegetation (SAV) may determine restoration success in coming years, as SAV can stabilize sediments, minimize pelagic nutrient availability and nutrient export.

Current concerns:

- Phytoplankton blooms can spur a cycle of SAV mortality, destabilizing sediments and releasing nutrients for further phytoplankton growth (conceptual model in Figure 3).
- A bloom-SAV mortality cycle appears to have already occurred in Blackwater Sound and Barnes Sound, evidenced by SAV losses since 2005 (Figure 4).
- Causeway excavation could yield additional turbidity, P, and N, and cause a bloom-SAV loss cycle in the shallow lake where SAV biomass is relatively high (Table 1) and a potentially large oligotrophic source for the bloom.
- Anoxia and sulfide can also cause SAV mortality. Hypoxic periods were observed in Lake Surprise in early fall (Figure 5) – turbidity and organic matter from excavation could increase O2 demand.
- Sediments in Lake Surprise are low density with relatively high organic matter, C, N and P content – potentially high mobility (Table 1).
- If Lake Surprise SAV mortality event occurs with causeway excavation, increased water exchange will increase sediment and nutrient export to adjacent basins.

Conclusions

- Turbidity and nutrient control: restoration success hinges on the ability to minimize light extinction (by sediment and phytoplankton) and prevent the start of the SAV mortality and phytoplankton feedback loop.
- Timing: causeway removal is scheduled for fall 2008, coincident with seasonally high water temperature and decreasing photoperiod. The potential for hypoxia/anoxia is highest at this time, with dependence on cloud cover, light extinction, organic matter loading from excavation, respiratory oxygen demand and water column stratification after rain events.
- Recognition of tradeoffs: the long-term benefits of causeway removal can best be realized by minimizing effects on SAV. Public awareness of likely short-term negative effects is needed.