



DERELICT VESSELS

by
Maria Sonnenberg

They may inspire artists to pick up a brush to capture their picturesque and faded glory, but derelict vessels are a headache for folks such as Matt Culver.



Culver, Brevard County's boating and waterways program coordinator, is responsible for keeping those broken-down old boats from becoming a navigational risk or an environmental problem. "We see a continuous number of vessels left unattended," said Culver. "Some are fully sunk and are hazards to navigation. Others are environmental hazards because they may leak fuels and chemicals and they are an eyesore. When they sink, they rip up the seagrass, which the fish need to survive. They're also not the image we want to convey to the many tourists who visit the area."

The majority of derelict vessels, as these old boats are officially called, run in the 23 to 28-foot range from the 1980s or before, although occasionally larger craft, such as a 55-foot shrimp trawler decimated by fire, are abandoned. Whenever a hurricane or bad storm blows by, there is an uptick on derelict vessels that just could not survive the bad weather. Their owners want nothing to do with them.

Many boats are in such bad shape that no one dares to set foot on them. Others become a refuge for the homeless, who are putting themselves at risk by living on a floating "home" that could sink at a moment's notice. Once the toys of boating enthusiasts, derelict vessels have come upon hard times as they are sold and re-sold and sold again

as their condition deteriorates with the passing years. "They have not been taken care of for many years," said Culver. At the end, someone may purchase these for just a couple of hundred dollars without realizing the amount of work and money it will take to keep them afloat. Eventually, they just admit the loss and walk away. "They are typically fixer-uppers someone bought without considering that it may take \$5,000 to bring them back to working condition," said Culver.

Sailboats and power boats alike are left to rot by the shoreline or on the water. While the majority can be found on the Indian River Lagoon, Culver also must deal with abandoned boats that wash ashore on Brevard's beaches. About half of the derelict vessels beachside were once recreational boats, while the other half are homemade makeshift contraptions that would-be migrants from the islands have powered with car engines to get them to America. A few may have transported drugs. The Coast Guard is the first line of inspection for the oceanside boats. "The Coast Guard will spray "OK" on the boats after they have been inspected for people and drugs," explained Culver.

While it is the owner's responsibility to dispose of their unwanted vessels properly, locating the owners is often difficult. A recently revised law requires boat owners to register their vessel under their name within

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30 days of purchase. Although in the past new owners were mandated to put their names on the title, there was no strong mechanism to enforce the law, leading to serious misunderstandings when officers from Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission or the Sheriff's Office come after the owners to pay for the boat's removal. "The original owners haven't seen the boat in years and don't have any idea of what we're talking about," said Culver.

Current owners are charged with a misdemeanor and taken to court to recover disposal costs...if the owners can be found. Even if the officers are able to track down current owners, they usually discover that these folks do not have the financial resources to pay for the disposal of their unwanted vessel. "Many times, you can't even track them down, and in some cases, you discover the current owners are indigent," said Culver.

Getting rid of a no longer viable boat is not cheap; the task costs between \$5,000 to \$7,000 for the derelict vessel removal company to raise the boat, haul it to shore and take it to the landfill. Yes, boats end up in the landfill. In fact, the county makes it as easy as possible for owners of derelict vessels to dispose of their unwanted boats. "The county has waived disposal fees for all derelict vessels," said Culver.

Grant money from Florida Fish & Wildlife and the Florida Inland Navigation District pays for the majority of the removals of derelict vessels, but this requires going through a complicated and lengthy grant process. As a result of the large number of boats made derelict by Hurricanes Matthew and Irma, the Brevard County Commission, along with the Tourist Development Council, also allocated special funding for the removal of the more than 50 vessels that had accumulated in the county's waterways.

Culver works with the municipalities of Cocoa, Melbourne and Palm Bay to keep derelict vessels at a minimum, but the task is never-ending.

The State of Florida counts close to one million registered boats. Time will take their toll on them and many will end up cast off. They may provide artistic inspiration for painters, but derelict vessels truly are a blight on the waterways. ■

To report a derelict vessel, call the Florida Fish & Wildlife Commission at 888-404-3922 or Matt Culver at 321-482-7970.

