

## **How Much Does the Gulf of Mexico Mean to You?**

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Have you ever considered what the Gulf of Mexico means to you? Is it important to you? Putting a value on an ecosystem or the services it provides is very difficult. However, it is done all the time on smaller scales, like the selling of land. The recent oil spill placed a new focus on the Gulf of Mexico what it means to us.

Each of us may place a different value on the Gulf of Mexico, but the economic value is clear. According to the National Marine Fisheries Service 2008 Fisheries Economics of the United States regional report the gross domestic product for the Gulf of Mexico totaled \$2.35 trillion in 2007. In 2008, Florida generated over \$5.7 billion sales, 108,600 jobs, and \$3.1 billion income impacts due to the fishing industry of the Gulf. Over 54,600 jobs were supported in West Florida alone as part of the recreational fishing industry. These figures represent some of the easily tracked and quantified services that the Gulf of Mexico provides. However, there is more than fishing that makes this water body important. The Gulf of Mexico also provides protective and regulating services. Coastal wetlands in the U.S. provide over \$23 million in protection for the mainland. These protections are in the form of sand bars, barrier islands, coastal dunes, and sea grass beds. All of these natural features provide a line of defense against extreme storms, surge, waves and winds which would otherwise need to be provided artificially. These areas also provide essential habitat that supports many of our sport fish, as well as a variety of threatened and endangered species. The currents help fuel weather patterns and climate which are defined by oceans. These massive water bodies are the basis for precipitation which directly impacts and feeds our water supplies, agricultural production and transportation.

Oceans also provide opportunities for medical advances and educational focus due to the tremendous biological diversity. Cultural services are the ones that most view as valuable on different levels. These services include providing area for bird watching (over 7 million participants), habitat for migrating shorebirds and waterfowl, and a top destination for tourism. Florida ranks in the top ten destinations to fish, swim, dive, and enjoy the beaches and wetlands. The Gulf of Mexico region also contains two of the ten National Seashores of the National Park Service and seven of the twenty-eight estuaries of national significance. Eco-tourism is a way to enjoy these natural areas in a nature friendly way and is a common occurrence in the Gulf of Mexico and surrounding areas.

So again, how much does the Gulf of Mexico mean to you? Get out there and enjoy what we have in our own backyard.

For more information on marine science and natural resources information, email or call [bsaari@ufl.edu](mailto:bsaari@ufl.edu) or 689-5850.

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