

ITEM 9:

Consider a Management Plan for Nature Coast Aquatic Preserve.

LOCATION:

Citrus, Hernando, and Pasco counties

APPLICANT:

Office of Resilience and Coastal Protection (RCP)

STAFF REMARKS:

Background

Nature Coast Aquatic Preserve (NCAP) is located north of Tampa Bay, on the west coast of Florida. Designated in 2020, NCAP is Florida's newest aquatic preserve. NCAP supports approximately 450,000 acres of submerged lands, including abundant seagrass meadows and many other important coastal ecosystems such as saltmarsh, sponge beds, oyster reefs, mangrove islands, marine springs, and hard bottom habitats. A variety of wildlife rely on these ecosystems, including endangered and threatened species such as manatees, green sea turtles, and the Gulf sturgeon. The extensive seagrass beds, the transition zone between saltmarsh and mangrove forests, and the karstic geology including springs, all contribute to the importance of NCAP's natural resources.

Under the Aquatic Preserve Resolution of 1969, and then in Chapter 258, Part II, Florida Statutes, aquatic preserves are set aside to be maintained in essentially the natural condition for the benefit of future generations.

There are at least 180 archaeological sites within the NCAP area ranging from simple food-processing stations to large villages and ceremonial centers. Citrus County, especially around Crystal River to the north of the NCAP has received a great deal of attention by archaeologists. The Gulf Archaeology Research Institute has conducted widespread coastal and estuarine surveys to expand on the cultural inventory.

Management Plan Overview

The management plan identifies the following issues and objectives.:

- **Water Resources - Goals**
 - Assess and define water quality and quantity monitoring needs
 - Expand strategic long-term continuous water quality monitoring efforts within NCAP to assist in the identification and future management of issues relating to the aquatic preserve's submerged resources.
 - Ensure that water quality meet or exceed water quality standards associated with their designated use as Class II and III waters, and that those that currently exceed the designated use are not degraded below their ambient condition pursuant to NCAP's status as an Outstanding Florida Water.
 - Emphasize upland connections to NCAP's submerged resources.
- **Management and Protection of Submerged Resources - Goals**
 - Assess historical and present condition of submerged resources to guide management decisions within the Nature Coast Aquatic Preserve.
 - To understand, protect and maintain existing seagrass resources, and restore and enhance degraded seagrass resources where these occur.

- To understand, protect and maintain hardbottom (coral/sponge bed) resources.
- Monitor the distribution and abundance of macroalgae within NCAP.
- Preserve the conditions of Nature Coast Aquatic Preserve’s submerged resources.
- Provide scientific data and information on the current and projected status of submerged resources to Nature Coast communities, businesses, and officials to improve stewardship of the NCAP in decision-making for coastal development and conservation.
- **Climate Change - Goal**
 - Ensure that the NCAP remains resilient to expected impacts from climate change, including tropicalization and climate-induced habitat migration.
- **Human Dimensions - Goals**
 - Identify the impacts of, remove, and reduce the presence of marine debris (litter, derelict vessels, ghost traps, aquaculture and discarded fishing gear) within the Aquatic Preserve.
 - Support community engagement to foster sustainable stewardship of NCAP’s resources.
 - Identify impacted areas, assess impact severity, and begin to implement reduction and restoration efforts relating to propeller damage, vessel grounding and anchoring related activities occurring to submerged resources within the Nature Coast Aquatic Preserve.

Public Involvement

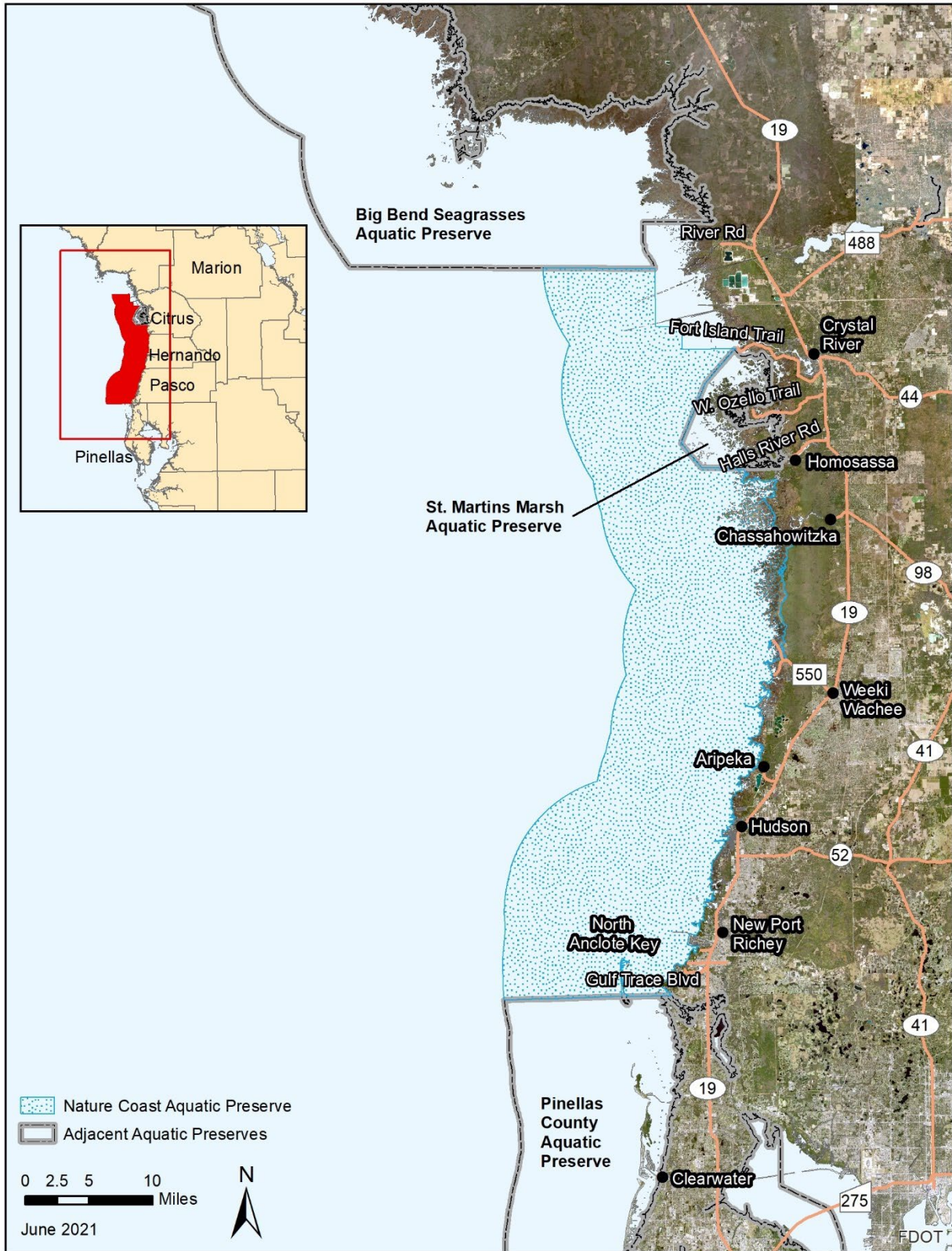
Nature Coast Aquatic Preserve staff held a series of online public meetings and advisory committee meetings to gather input during the drafting of the plan. After completion of the draft, a public meeting and advisory committee meeting were held at Crystal River, Florida, on May 24, 2022, and May 26, 2022, to receive input on the draft management plan. The main concerns raised by the public were that water quality should be maintained or improved from baseline conditions at the time of adoption, addressing damage to seagrass habitats, especially prop scarring, and emphasizing public education and engagement.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

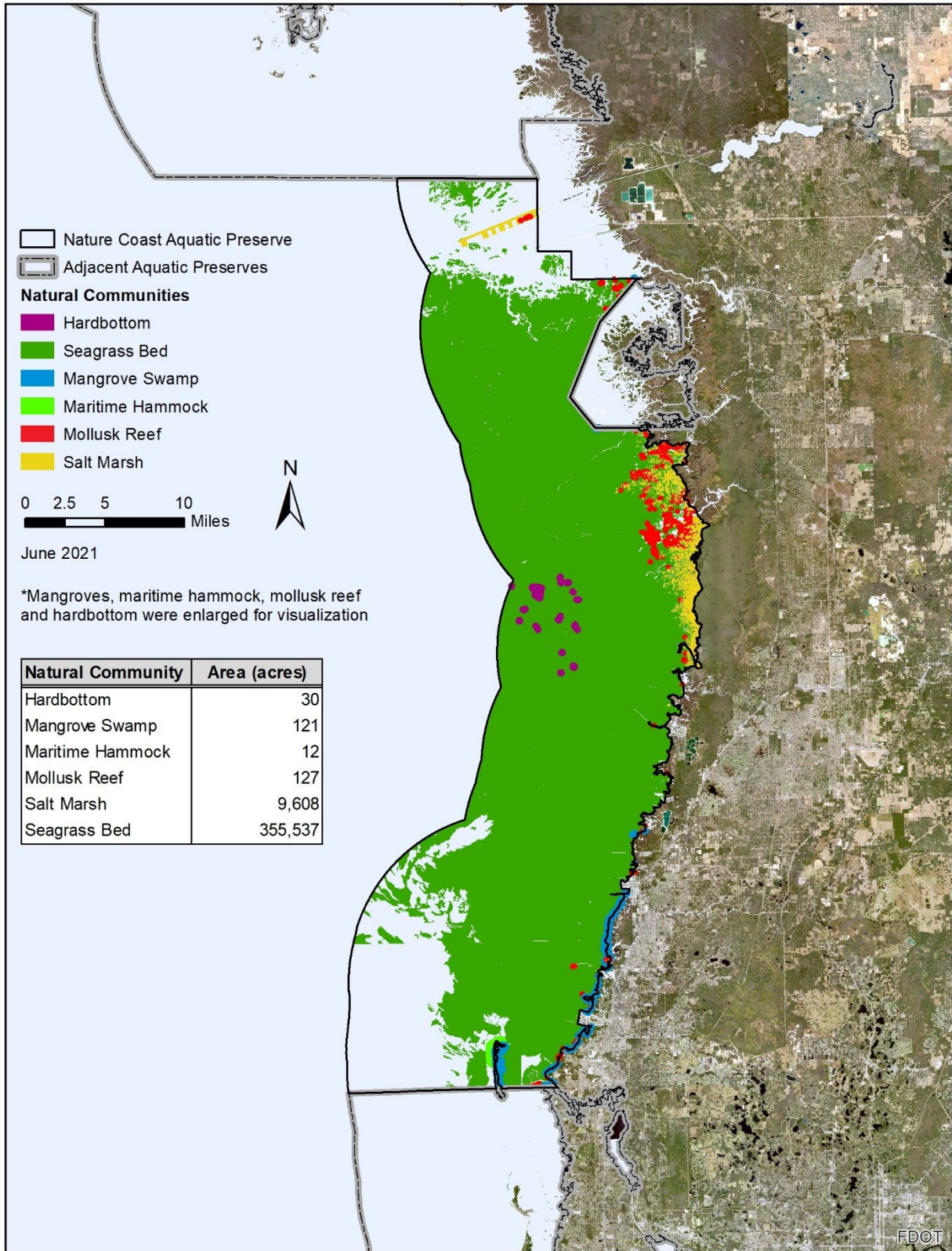
Approve the management plan.

ARC RECOMMENDATION:

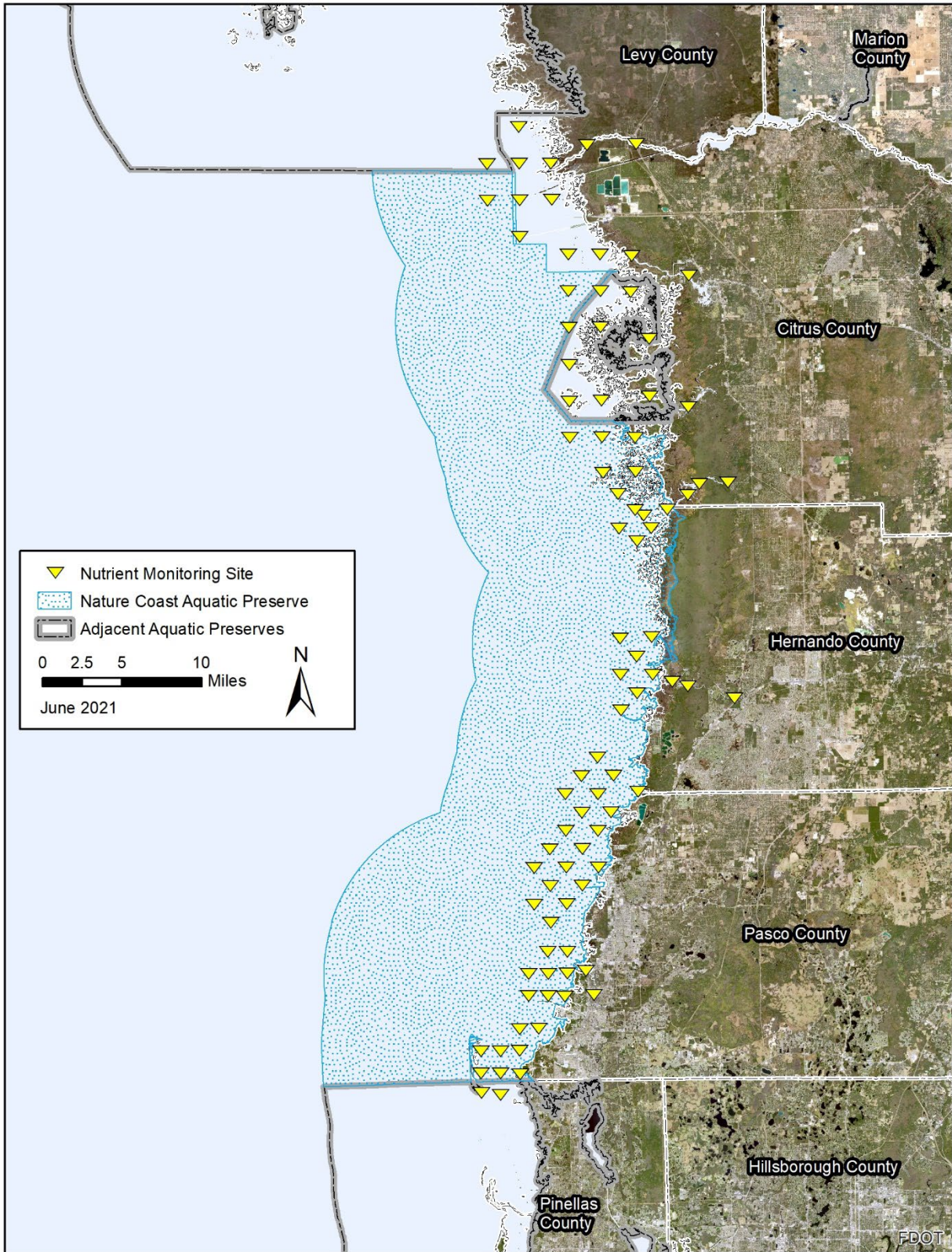
- () **APPROVE**
- () **APPROVE WITH MODIFICATIONS:** _____
- () **DEFER**
- () **WITHDRAW**
- () **NOT APPROVE**
- () **OTHER:** _____



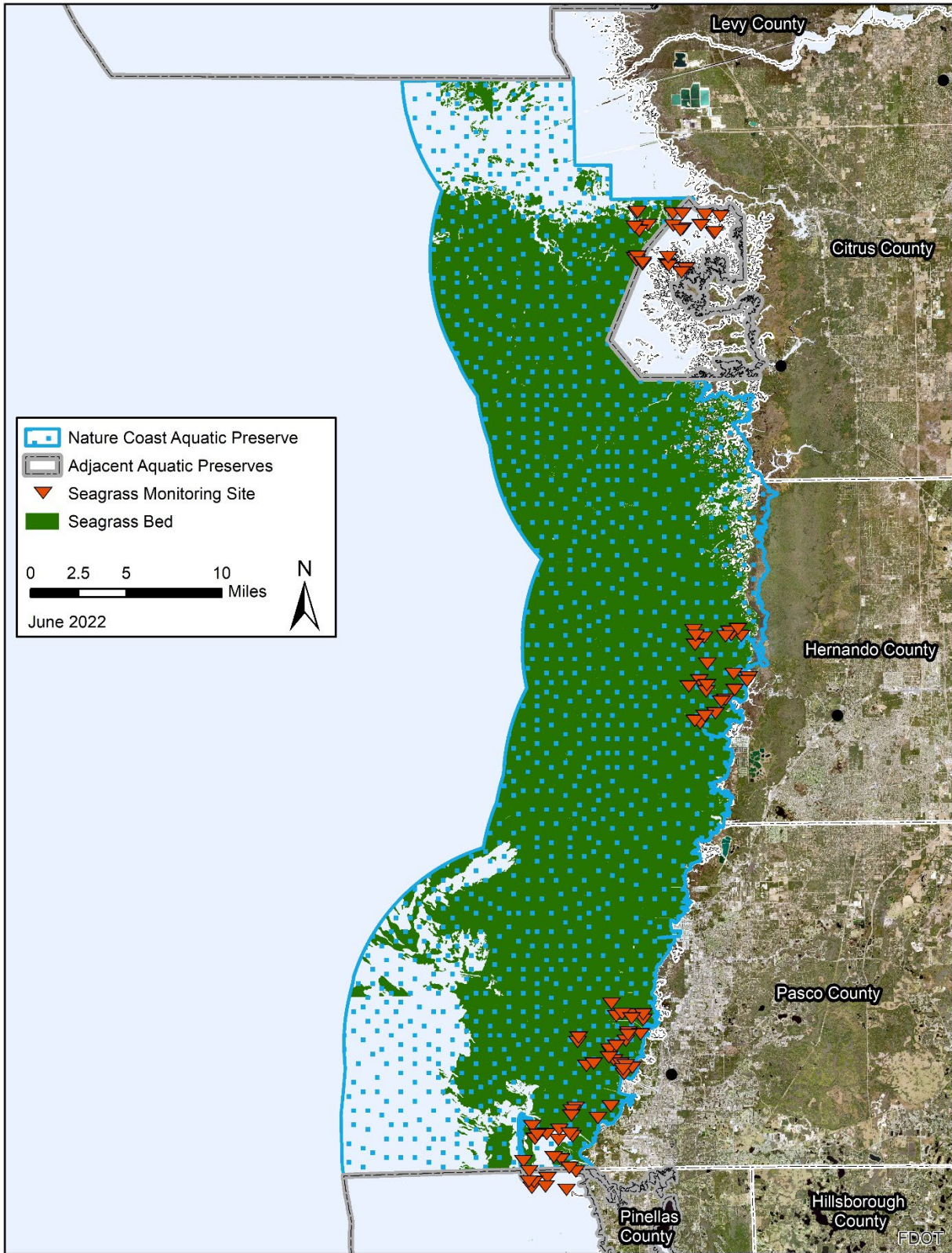
Nature Coast Aquatic Preserve.



Florida Natural Areas Inventory natural communities of the Nature Coast Aquatic Preserve.



Project COAST water quality monitoring stations.



Seagrass monitoring locations within the Nature Coast Aquatic Preserve.