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# Fighting Red Tide, One Neighborhood Pond at a Time

With philanthropic support, an ambitious partnership helps local Gulf Coast communities upgrade their stormwater retention ponds.

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IMAGE: COURTESY SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT COUNCIL OF SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

**A GRASSROOTS EFFORT** to improve local environmental water quality, starting at the neighborhood level, is beginning to bloom big-time.

Building on a successful pilot program that has helped about a dozen Sarasota County homeowner communities bolster (and beautify) their stormwater retention ponds, [Solutions to Avoid Red Tide](#)—or START—has secured a major grant from Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation to create a regional “Healthy Pond Collaborative.”

## A page from the *Playbook*

START’s idea for a pond-restoration program came from the [Community Playbook for Healthy Waterways](#), an online resource published by Gulf Coast Community Foundation to inform and inspire community-wide ownership of our region’s water quality. The *Playbook* details more than 40 different activities for everyone from policymakers to homeowners associations who have an effect on the health of our watershed.

“Sarasota County’s economy and reputation depend on protecting and restoring our natural waters,” says Gulf Coast’s Jon Thaxton, who spearheaded the *Playbook* initiative. “This resource focuses, prioritizes, and coordinates critical activities we must undertake to realize our community’s vision for clean and healthy waters.”

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One of those activities: [bringing “best management practices” for handling stormwater](#) to privately owned, developed properties across the county. According to START, stormwater contributes 65 percent of the nitrogen in Sarasota Bay that feeds red tide and causes other damage to water quality and wildlife. But most local stormwater ponds operate at just 40 percent to 60 percent efficiency in removing excess nutrients like nitrogen.

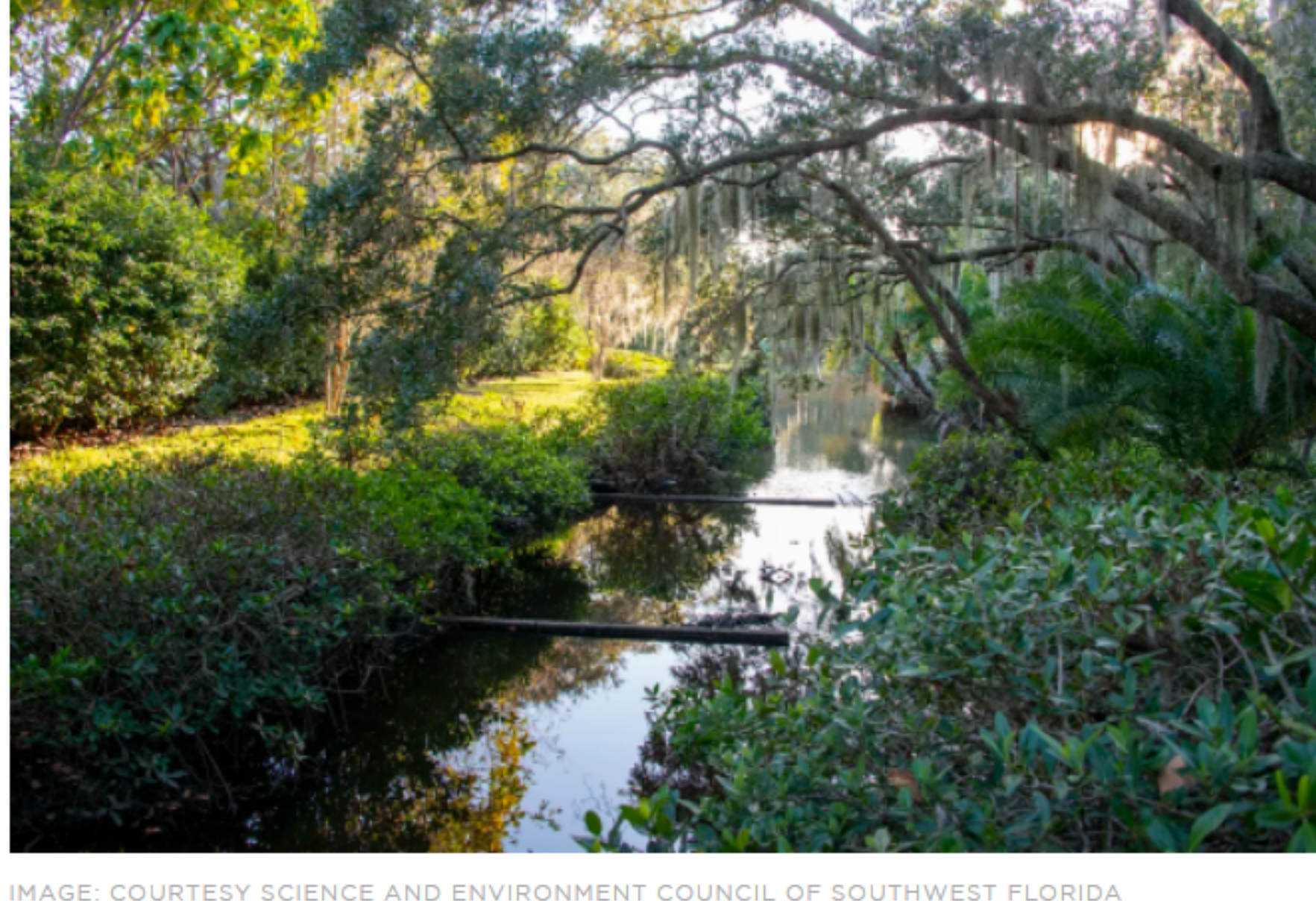


IMAGE: COURTESY SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT COUNCIL OF SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

START took a page from the *Playbook* and developed a program to provide expert consultation and subsidize costs for neighborhoods that want to upgrade their ailing retention ponds. The environmental nonprofit knew that Sarasota County’s [Neighborhood Environmental Stewardship Team](#) (NEST) already offered hands-on education and other support to help HOA leaders implement watershed-friendly practices. But it also recognized that more marketing outreach and funding incentives for neighborhoods could leverage NEST’s expertise and activate even more homeowners.



## Dollars and sense to go green

With a \$10,000 seed grant from Gulf Coast Community Foundation, START partnered with NEST and other environmental groups to launch its [Stormwater Pond Enhancement Program](#). On top of free advice on how to restore and improve their ponds, the program offers neighborhoods incentive funding to help them install native aquatic plants that stabilize pond banks and filter stormwater runoff.

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“We show them they will save money by properly managing their ponds, and that gets everybody’s attention,” says START CEO Sandy Gilbert. “Once they understand the real economics of pond enhancements, the community really gets behind the effort and has a sense of pride that they are part of the fight to control red tide.”

The program has helped nearly a dozen neighborhoods, including [Rivendell](#) in Osprey and [Pinebrook South](#) in Venice, upgrade their ponds. START and its partners also worked with the Venice Area Audubon Society to enhance the popular [Venice Rookery](#), an annual nesting site for herons, egrets, and other birds that draws photographers and birders from around the country.



IMAGE: COURTESY SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT COUNCIL OF SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

Buoyed by that success, START recently attracted a \$250,000, three-year grant from Barancik Foundation to go much bigger with a regional [Healthy Pond Collaborative](#).

The collaborative will help even more neighborhoods upgrade their ponds and cost-share the improvements. It also will create and distribute a step-by-step pond enhancement guide—[another Playbook recommendation](#)—to help neighborhoods get started, as well as host educational focus groups and perform follow-up monitoring of pond enhancement projects. Partners include START, NEST, [UF/IFAS Extension Sarasota County](#), and [Science and Environment Council of Southwest Florida](#).

“This is just the kind of thing we hoped would happen when we created the *Playbook*,” says Gulf Coast’s Thaxton. “By bringing different groups together, we can create cost-sharing solutions to the issues that affect our water quality. It will take work from many different sectors to keep our waterways clean and healthy.”



IMAGE: COURTESY GULF COAST COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

