

Egmont has played an important role in the **preservation of Tampa Bay's natural and cultural heritage**; full of history and culture, beautiful pristine beaches, and wonderful wildlife, Egmont Key is preserved for the enjoyment of present and future generations of Americans. Established as both a National Wildlife Refuge and a State Park, it is visited by an estimated 200,000 visitors each year who explore and marvel at what this small island has to offer.

Its history traces back to the early 1500's with the Spanish exploration of the Tampa Bay area; it eventually became the site of the former US Army Fort Dade Military Reservation, set to protect the bay from invasion during the Spanish-American War in 1898. Abundant reminders of this unique military past can be found scattered throughout the island today, from the gun batteries to the brick carriage roads. Although deactivated in 1921, Egmont Key still supported military activity through World War II.

Additionally, Egmont Key is home to the still functional 153 year-old lighthouse – constructed partly in anticipation of commercial traffic. First built in 1848, bad storms and hurricanes led to its demise some years later. Consequently, funds were appropriated by Congress to re-build the structure and in 1858 the lighthouse stood as it still stands today.

Egmont Key was established as a National Wildlife Refuge in 1974 to protect the diverse community of animals and plants it hosts, and many of which are either threatened or endangered. The Egmont Key State Park overlay of the refuge was added in 1991 to assist in the protection of this valuable resource. **Laughing gulls, royal terns, sandwich terns, American oystercatchers, white ibis, brown pelicans, osprey**, and sometimes **black skimmers, in excess of 30,000 nesting pairs**, use Egmont Key for **nesting, resting and feeding**. Egmont Key is also in an essential stopover for migrating and wintering birds, as well as critical wintering habitat for endangered **piping plovers**. Resident **gopher tortoises and box turtles**, roam free travelling the old carriage roads without the risk of being crushed by vehicles or being displaced of their habitat due to development.

In an area where beachfront is high dollar real estate, development threatens the availability of suitable habitat for sea turtles to nest. Egmont Key has provided that niche since its establishment as a Refuge; it has provided vital nesting habitat for endangered **loggerhead sea turtles**, where year after year, 40-50 nests successfully hatch each year. Still, erosion claims the beachfront that many wildlife species, birds and sea turtles included, need to survive.

Not only is Egmont Key a popular destination for female sea turtles, it is also a popular hot spot for locals. Every summer, **boaters, nature lovers, and history buffs flock the island to experience Florida at its best**. Whether on their own boats or by ferry an estimated 200,000 people gather every year at Egmont Key. Thus, recreation on this island is **beneficial** to our **local economy** – \$6.9 million dollars beneficial (as of 2010).

Furthermore, Egmont Key is also the base of the **Tampa Bay Pilots Association** – the crew responsible for safely navigating large commercial ships (barges, cruise ships, etc) into Tampa's harbor. **Founded since 1886**, the Pilot's association has since **operated from Egmont Key**. Logistically feasible for meeting vessels to and from sea, their

existing location cuts their travel time, and fuel usage when meeting these ships to pilot them. The Pilots have undeniably played an intricate role in the growth and settlement of the Bay area, and for over a century have successfully operated from Egmont Key.

Why is the risk if losing all of this so imminent? As George Washington very eloquently wrote in a letter to James McHenry in 1798, “**It is much easier at all times to prevent an evil than to rectify mistakes**” – these are the lessons of **Passage Key**. Located nearly a mile south of Egmont Key, Passage Key was **once a 60 acre island** covered by lush vegetation and withholding a freshwater lake. It was designated as bird reservation in 1905 by President Theodore Roosevelt due to the great number of birds that nested in the area; it once hosted the largest royal and sandwich tern colonies in the state. After a series of bad hurricanes and tropical storms eroded the island to a meandering sandbar – Passage Key is lost forever and is **now only visible during low low tides**.

Egmont Key has shown signs of erosion for a while now. Where **it once was a 539 acre island** (as stated in its original 1877 survey), it has now dwindled to approximately **260 acres** and still shrinking. Every storm, high tide, or high wind events slowly eat away at it. Today, several historical structures belonging to Fort Dade have succumbed to erosion. A prime example is a now popular snorkeling destination – once Batteries Burchstead and Paige. The south mining casemate collapsed due to beachfront erosion, and what once was a centrally located (east to west) coal fueled power plant is now a collapsed pile of concrete rubble.

The signs of erosion are more evident from a bird’s eye view – aerial images and survey maps show the ever changing western shoreline through the years:

Egmont Key is a valuable place to preserve and you can help keep it afloat! Don’t let erosion claim what is yours.