Mangroves: Our Amazing Living Shores

Charlotte Harbor's future depends on its mangroves – and choices we make today

Richard Whitman, MS, PhD
Heal Our Harbor

In natural resource management, we often talk about **ecological services**—the benefits nature provides to a community. Some are tangible, such as cleaner water, public health, food, shoreline protection, and climate resilience. Others are intangible but equally valuable: enjoyment, beauty, and a sense of place. When combined with biodiversity and fundamental food-web dynamics, the gifts that mangroves provide are extraordinary, rivaled only by coral reefs and rainforests. Without mangroves, the ecology of our estuary—and many of the benefits we enjoy—would quickly unravel!

Along the shores of Charlotte Harbor, mangroves form three distinct zones as the landscape rises from shallow water to dry land. Closest to the water are **Red Mangroves**, easily recognized by their prop roots that stabilize the trees and create sheltered nurseries for fish and invertebrates. Behind them, in the intertidal zone, grow **Black Mangroves**, which spread their specialized roots across the sediments. Many animals move between these first two zones seeking food and refuge. Further inland, where the ground floods only during storms or very high tides, are the **White Mangroves**, whose roots remain underground. All three species tolerate high salt, low oxygen, and periodic inundation—conditions that exclude most plants.

Ecological Services

One of the most important services mangroves provide is **shoreline protection**. Their dense roots slow waves, storm surge, and floodwater, trapping debris and nutrient-rich particles that become fuel for microbes. Their job is to recycle essential biological material needed for harbor ecosystem functioning. By the time water reaches the White Mangroves, much of its force has diminished. Mangroves also moderate flash floods by slowing water movement and absorbing peak flows.

Mangroves also serve as natural **nutrient filters**. By capturing suspended solids, wastes, and organic debris, they reduce excess nitrogen and phosphorus—major drivers of water-quality decline. These trapped materials feed not only the mangroves themselves but also the hundreds of species living within the forest and open water too. Energy and nutrients entering the Harbor from the Gulf, rivers, and stormwater runoff are processed and redistributed to bacteria, fungi, plankton, bottom dwellers, fish, and organisms attached to mangrove roots. This concentrated productivity is why anglers often fish along mangrove edges.

In a stressed estuary such as Charlotte Harbor, mangroves play an even more vital role. Their leaves and aerial roots make them more tolerant of eutrophication than most other plants. They process much of the material trapped among their roots and stems, and pollutants they cannot digest often become buried and less bioavailable—including nitrogen and phosphorus. Mangroves also help reduce fecal indicator bacteria such as **E. coli** and **Enterococci**, improving recreational water quality by slowing water down allowing nature to do the rest. During storms or extreme tides, some stored sediments can be resuspended, contributing to algal blooms or short-term water-quality declines, but overall mangroves remain one of our strongest defenses.

Life in the Mangroves

Mangrove forests support an extraordinary variety of organisms. Some spend their entire lives among the roots and canopy, while others use the mangroves as nurseries before moving into deeper waters. One useful way to understand these communities is by their feeding strategies.

Detritivores—organisms that consume decomposing plant material—form the foundation of the mangrove food web. Mangroves slow the water, trap sediments, and provide protected surfaces for attachment. Common detritivores include fiddler and hermit crabs, amphipods, worms, grass shrimp, mysids, snails, mullet, mojarras, and killifish. These species break down organic material and make nutrients available to the rest of the ecosystem.

Filter feeders are equally important. These organisms extract particulate matter and plankton from the water around the mangrove roots, helping clarify the water. Examples include oysters, barnacles, mussels, sea squirts, sponges, bryozoans and zooplankton.

Small predators and scavengers—juvenile snook, snapper, red drum, silversides, pinfish, snapping shrimp, and blue crabs—hunt and forage throughout the mangrove margins. Beyond them lie the **larger predators** that draw the attention of fishermen: redfish, snook, snapper, tarpon, and jacks.

Above the waterline, mangroves support an impressive assemblage of insects and other small creatures. While few insects can tolerate seawater, they thrive on the landward side. Many, such as moths, damselflies, dragonflies, honeybees, and longhorn beetles, are appreciated; others, like mosquitoes and no-see-ums, are not. Ants, flies, beetles, and butterflies serve as important pollinators.

Large Predators. Mangroves also host a wide variety of larger predators. Fish-eating birds such as anhingas, bald eagles, pelicans, ospreys, and cormorants patrol their edges. Wading birds—including herons, egrets, and ibis—probe for fish, crabs, and insects. Shorebirds such as willets, plovers, and sandpipers forage along exposed flats. Opportunistic feeders like crows, gulls, and grackles take advantage of whatever they can find. Reptiles and mammals also inhabit the mangroves, including alligators, water snakes, juvenile turtles, raccoons, otters, and familiar anole lizards. Florida Museum estimates that 90% of commercially important harbor fish use mangroves during their life cycle!

Ecological Disservice

The Magnificent Mangroves are essential to the ecological health of Charlotte Harbor. Yet the Harbor faces growing pressures—from excess fertilizer and toxins to algal blooms, plastics, and trash. Mangroves can handle some of this burden, but even they cannot keep pace with persistent human-driven pollution. When natural systems are overwhelmed, water quality declines, Charlotte Harbor and its inhabitants suffers, including us.

Call to Action

You can help protect this vital ecosystem by:

1. **Promoting the protection of mangroves**,
2. **Volunteering for cleanup events**,
3. **Supporting mangrove planting and living shoreline projects**, and
4. **Encouraging education about the value of mangroves**.

Charlotte Harbor's future depends on the resilience of its mangroves—and the choices we make today.

December 18, 2025	Dr. Richard Whitman is Chief Science Officer with Heal Our Harbor, Inc. (HOH), and a retired Research Manager and Aquatic Ecologist. HOH is a nonprofit organization providing scientific information, education and perspective on the environmental health of the Charlotte Harbor watershed. Contact him: Richard.Whitman@HealOurHarbor.org, and visit HOH on Facebook https://bit.ly/HOHfla, or on the web at www.healourharbor.org.