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Specialty license plates chip in big time

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MANATEE -- Drivers here definitely like their sea creatures. The big winners so far this year in specialty license plate sales: manatees, dolphins and sea turtles.

A review of Manatee County sales of specialty plates shows that environmental causes did particularly well, according to statistics listed on the Florida Department of Motor Vehicles' website.

Among the most popular in Manatee County from January through November:

- n Save the Manatee, with 1,610
- n Protect Wild Dolphins, 1,366
- n Helping Sea Turtles Survive, with 1,237
- n Protect Our Reefs, 1,175
- n Protect the Panther, 1,091

Other popular plates locally benefited the University of Florida, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, Choose Life and the University of South Florida.

Statewide, rankings for 2010 are not yet available, but in 2009, the Top 10 had the University of Florida at No. 1, which got \$2.6 million from sales of its plate. It was followed by Helping Sea Turtles Survive; Florida State University; dolphins, panthers, manatees; the U.S. Marine Corps; reefs; Choose Life, and the Bucs.

The net revenue collected in Florida during fiscal year 2009-10 for all specialty plates totaled nearly \$31 million, according to the DMV website.

Drivers who want to buy specialty plates pay an extra fee when registering their vehicles, which helps to support their favorite organization or cause. The price of each specialty plate varies.

Money raised through the sale of "Save the Manatee" plates goes to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Fish & Wildlife Research Institute, with main offices in St. Petersburg. Plate sales statewide generated \$1,238,670 for programs on behalf of the big, plant-eating mammals that are the namesake of Manatee County.

USF's plate costs \$25 annually. Money from the added fee comes back to help local students through the college's alumni association scholarships, said Anila Jain, a River Club resident and former president of the USF Alumni Association.

USF's total so far this year came to \$360,394, according to the DMV website.

"It is a real plus for the university because it does benefit students directly," she said. "Whatever organization they benefit, it is definitely a plus for the organization."

Manatee County drivers bought 453 USF plates between January and November.

Sarasota's Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium gets money generated by the "Protect Our Reefs" plate, which totaled \$878,025 in the latest accounting.

The money financed coral reef research in the Florida Keys, site of the only barrier reef in the continental United States, according to Hayley Rutger, a spokeswoman for Mote.

She noted that delicate coral reefs are declining around the world. Mote's researchers have been transplanting species of corals to help the reefs recover, she said.

The money also finances conservation and education activities.

A special traveling exhibit partly supported by "Protect Our Reefs" funds is on display at Mote's Sarasota facility through Jan. 10, Rutger said.

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