



# SEAHORSE SOCIETY

BY XAVIER CORTADA

## ABOUT SEAHORSE SOCIETY

"Littoral Creatures," an art exhibit by artist Xavier Cortada, opened at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Biscayne Nature Center on September 13, 2014, his 50th birthday. The exhibit was the launch of his participatory eco-art effort to draw attention to the ongoing threats to the seagrass of Biscayne by focusing on the creatures that make it their home. He selected the Center's gallery at the water's edge on Key Biscayne because of its experiential environmental education on seagrass beds.

The exhibit was presented with the Biscayne Bay Aquatic Preserve (BBAP), a State of Florida Department of Environmental Protection regulatory agency charged with overseeing Biscayne Bay. In order to commemorate BBAP's 40th anniversary, Cortada unveiled the poster of the "Seahorse | Seagrass" painting at the opening reception of the exhibit. Exhibit-goers received a copy of the poster along with information on how to join Cortada in celebrating forty years of protecting the bay. They were inducted into the "Seahorse Society" and encouraged to engage in eco-actions to protect the bay and its seagrasses for the next 40 years.

"Littoral Creatures" was also exhibited at the Botanical Gardens at Kona Kai in Key Largo, the Bakehouse Art Complex in Miami, and at the Broward College South Campus in Pembroke Pines.

*Xavier Cortada, "Seahorse | Seagrass," 60" x 36", acrylic on canvas, 2014*





*Littoral Creatures exhibit at Marjory Stoneman Douglas Biscayne Nature Center*



# LITTORAL CREATURES

Cortada focused his creative efforts on the many creatures that depend on seagrass for their survival. By highlighting some of the many sea creatures we humans love, Cortada hopes people will come to understand the importance of protecting the underwater plants that provide their shelter and food; plants rarely noticed by us - the seagrass.

The seahorse paintings in the exhibit along with the induction of Littoral Creatures exhibit attendees kickstarted the Seahorse Society with the Biscayne Bay Aquatic Preserves to protect the seagrasses that serve as habitats for seahorses and all littoral creatures, key indicators of the health of our local ecosystems.

*Xavier Cortada, "Seahorse Society: North (1), South (2), East (3), and West (4)" 48" x 36", acrylic on canvas, 2014*



[ 1 ]



[ 2 ]



[ 3 ]



[ 4 ]



Flags painted by Miami Country Day School Students

# ECO-ACTIONS

On September 23, 2014, fifty four students at Miami Country Day School honored the Biscayne Bay Aquatic Preserves' 40th Anniversary by creating their seahorse on a flag, inspired by Xavier Cortada's "Seahorse|Seagrass" painting. Fourth graders were paired with kindergartners to create 54 beautiful flags, including their "eco-action" to help protect Biscayne Bay Aquatic Preserves for the next 40 years.

Commemorating the 40th Anniversary, Cortada's list of eco-actions for participants to create their personal commitments to span over 40 seconds, 40 minutes, 40 hours, and 40 years.

## PROTECT BISCAYNE BAY IN...

### 40 SECONDS

- Turn off water when brushing your teeth, bathing, and washing your hands
- Throw garbage in trash cans
- Talk to your friends and family about what you have learned about Biscayne Bay
- Purchase a specialty license plate of a manatee, dolphin, reefs, and sea turtle
- Turning A/C to 76-78 degrees F when home and 80 degrees F while away
- Turn lights and the TV off when you leave a room
- Purchase rechargeable batteries

### 40 HOURS

- Take a FREE Florida Boat and Safety Course
- Volunteer to restore mangroves with the Urban Paradise Guild
- Volunteer with local groups in removing invasive species
- Compost at home

### 40 MINUTES

- Plant native South Florida plants
- Walk along Biscayne Bay's shoreline, pick up trash, and leave only your footprint behind
- Volunteer with the Marine Animal Rescue society
- Use environmentally friendly soap when washing your boat and car
- Volunteer for BBAP and do a shoreline cleanup
- Dispose of your pet's waste in a trash can
- Attend a free fish and/or coral reef identification class
- Learn which fish species are sustainably harvested

### 40 YEARS

- Know your waterways: obey speed zones, check tide charts, avoid shallow areas
- Choose reusable bottles and cloth bags over plastic bottles and shopping bags
- Make a personal commitment to saving energy at home

# SEAHORSE SOCIETY PADDLE OUT

On Saturday, January 10th, 2015, Seahorse Society participants convened to participate in “Paddle Out! Biscayne Bay” event. The participants traveled to an island in the northern part of the aquatic preserves in order to celebrate the bay and pledge their own personal eco-action for the stewardship of the aquatic preserves.

The “Paddle Out! Biscayne Bay” adventure paddle participants were invited to travel via canoes, kayaks and paddleboards along a three-mile route to Helker’s Island, while non-paddlers enjoyed a catamaran tour of the aquatic preserves aboard Miami-Dade County’s Pelican Skipper.

Cortada led an eco-art project installation on Helker’s Island using the green flags painted by Miami Country Day School students who pledged an eco-action – a personal commitment to help Biscayne Bay not just survive, but thrive, for the next 40 years.

As the paddlers approached the island, they were greeted by a line of painted flags floating on the water and crossing the shoreline and into the island’s tree hammock. Participants followed the line and selected the flags that most resonated with them. On land, they gathered in a circle and read them to each other in a circle, as they, too, pledged their own eco-action.

“The installation referenced the interconnectedness of land and water,” said Cortada. “It also emphasized our role as stewards. The actions we take or fail to take on land directly impact on our precious bay.”

*Flags at Helker’s Island, painted by Miami Country Day School fourth graders and kindergarteners | Photo by Jared Jacobs*





Photos by Jared Jacobs

# SEAHORSES AT PINECREST GARDENS

On April 6, 2017, Cortada opened his "Seahorses" exhibit at Pinecrest Gardens' Historic Entrance. Using the exhibition as a platform, Cortada partnered with Project Seahorse, an international marine conservation group, running a six-week outreach and awareness-building program in South Florida, focused on the conservation of these species in South Florida.

"Through art, we help communities visualize themselves as change agents, and I paint seahorses to draw viewers in," said Cortada. "I want to engage them as environmental stewards and I want them to engage in eco-actions. I want them to make a personal commitment to help protect seahorse habitats from environmental degradation and the impacts of global climate change."

*On Earth Day 2017, Project Seahorse scientist Emilie Stump led a presentation at Pinecrest Gardens' Hibiscus Gallery.*



*Educational programming at Sweetwater Elementary School on seahorses and protecting their habitats*

## PROGRAMMING AT SWEETWATER ELEMENTARY

Cortada and Project Seahorse partnered to present an educational event at Sweetwater Elementary school on May 2nd, 2017. The event taught students about Seahorses, the magical creatures that call Biscayne National Park and the waters of south Florida their home.

Project Seahorse scientist Emilie Stump discussed the importance of seahorses in South Florida and the educational and research efforts conducted by her international group. Students also participated in Cortada's collaborative art project culminating in an installation that captures their pledge to protect these creatures. At the end of the event, students were inducted into the Seahorse Society.

# HOW TO PARTICIPATE

Seahorse Society participants are invited to make a pledge to protect seahorses and their habitat by painting the animal on a stone and committing to engaging in an eco-action. The stone is to be placed near their bedside or in a location that serves to remind them of their pledge. Documenting this process is a requisite aspect of the participatory component, as Cortada instructs his participants to upload photos to social media using #SeahorseSociety.

Through this project, Cortada prompts actual intervention to be taken towards the environment, as a way of generating of awareness around the issue. The participants' eco-actions hopefully prompt the mitigation of the degradation of Biscayne Bay. Cortada wants to create activists out of his participants, displaying a tenet of thinking globally and acting locally.

## HOW TO PARTICIPATE

- Pledge to perform one of Cortada's eco-actions to protect Biscayne Bay, its seagrasses and seahorses
- Find a small stone, paint a seahorse on it and place it in a conspicuous place
- Take a photo of the stone and post it on social media, tagging it with the hashtag #SeahorseSociety
- Ask others to join you in taking a pledge

*Students participating in the participatory art component of "Seahorse Society" at Sweetwater Elementary School*





Xavier Cortada is an artist, Professor of Practice at the University of Miami Department of Art and Art History and Artist-in-Residence at Pinecrest Gardens, where his studio, gallery and socially engaged art practice are based. Cortada's work is intended to generate awareness and action towards issues of global climate change. Using art's elasticity to engage others, Cortada educates and inspires community members to work and learn together to solve our community's problems.

The artist has created art installations at the North and South Poles to address environmental concerns at every point in between. He has developed numerous collaborative art projects globally, including peace murals in Cyprus and Northern Ireland, child welfare murals in Bolivia and Panama, AIDS murals in Geneva and South Africa, and eco-art projects in Hawaii, New Hampshire, Taiwan, Holland and Latvia.

Cortada has also been commissioned to create art for the White House, the World Bank, Pinecrest Village Hall, Miami City Hall, Miami-Dade County Hall, Florida Botanical Gardens, Port Everglades, the Florida Turnpike, the University of Miami, the Miami Art Museum, the Museum of Florida History and the Frost Art Museum.

His work is in the permanent collections of the Perez Art Museum Miami (PAMM), the NSU Museum of Art in Ft. Lauderdale, the Whatcom Museum, the Phillip and Patricia Frost Art Museum, the MDC Museum of Art + Design and the World Bank.

Cortada, born in Albany, NY and raised in Miami, holds undergraduate, graduate and law degrees from the University of Miami.

To learn more, visit [www.cortada.com](http://www.cortada.com).



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