STOP #5: MARINE SCIENCE INSTITUTE WETLANDS EDUCATION CENTER AND SOUTH JETTY

The Wetlands Education Center occupies 3.5 acres on The University of Texas at Austin Marine Science Institute. It is a marsh/seagrass pond landscaped and planted with various seagrasses and appropriate coastal vegetation nourished by water from the Aransas Pass Ship Channel (**fig. 1**). The Wetlands Education Center, offers an educational resource for the citizens of Texas and a “living laboratory” for students and scientists.

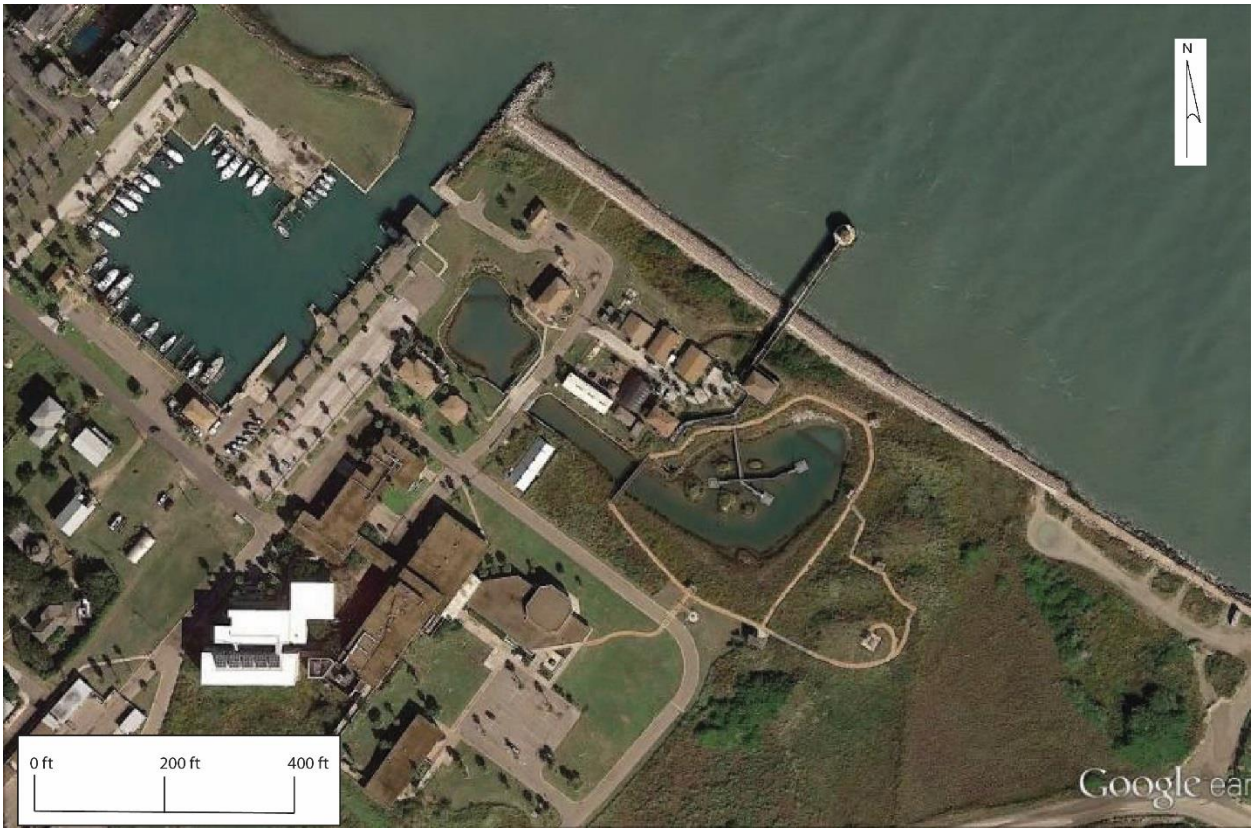

Figure 1. Wetlands Education Center at The University of Texas at Austin Marine Science Institute.

Visiting the Center helps us gain a better understanding and appreciation for the role each wetland environment plays in supporting and maintaining a productive barrier island. It is important to preserve coastal wetlands and because they are vital to the health of the entire coastal system. The goal of the Wetlands Education Center is to educate visitors about the importance of wetlands to both the natural system and humans.

Explore the Wetlands Education Center on your own or with a group. There is a crushed granite path that will take you around the pond. Several informative educational signs are around the trail that will help you interpret the environment you are viewing as well as help you to appreciate the interplay between them.

The Wetlands Education Center allows easy access to the South Jetty (**fig. 2**) at the north end of Mustang Island and Aransas Pass. This is a very popular place among fisherman and those who like to watch the sunrise over the Gulf of Mexico. It is also a fun place to sit and watch boats and tankers enter and exit Aransas Pass. If you are lucky, you will catch a tanker with a pod of dolphins riding the bow wake or be able to see sea turtles swimming in the Pass.

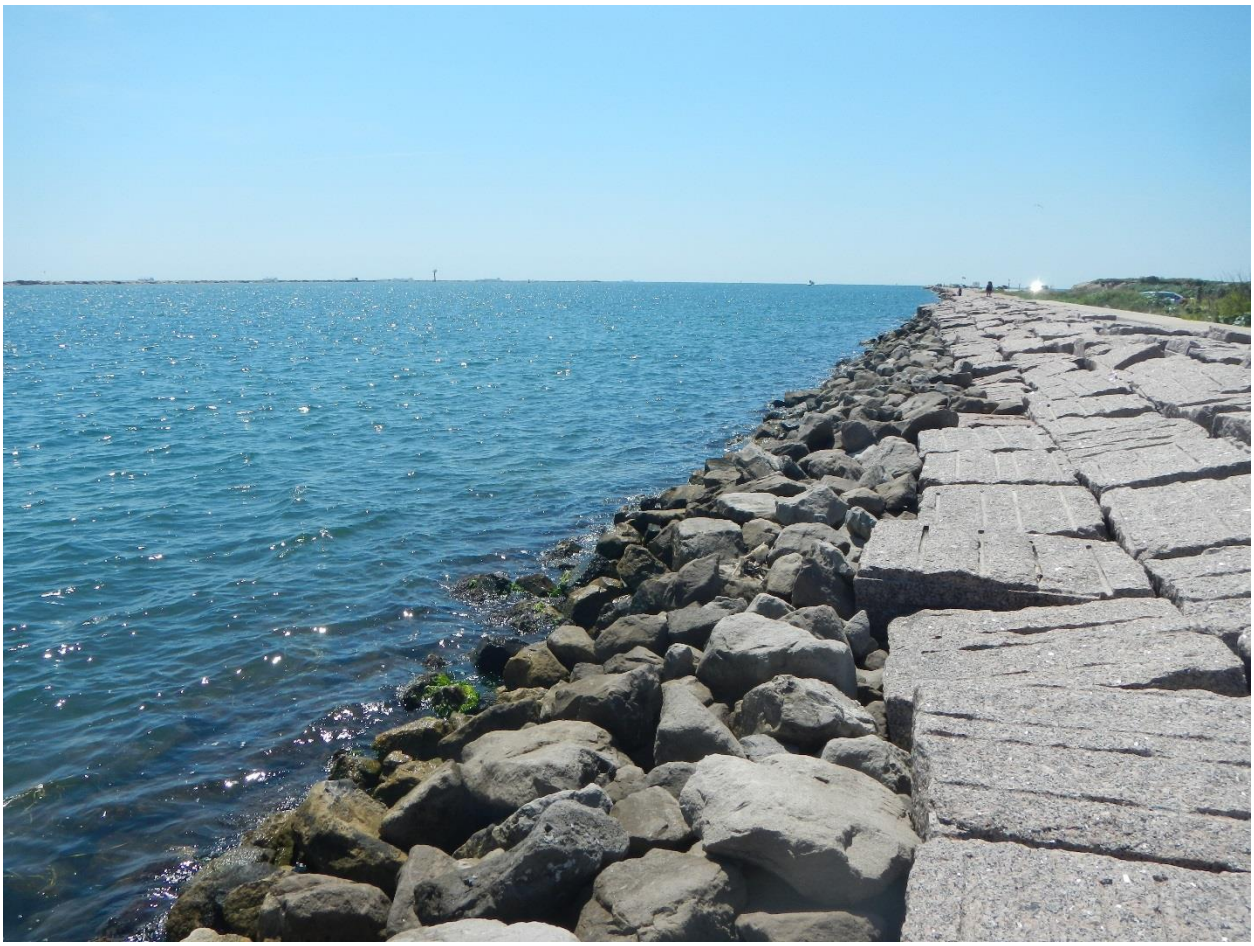

Figure 2. The South Jetty on Mustang Island.

Aransas Pass is a natural tidal inlet separating Mustang Island and San Jose Island. Prior to construction of the jetties, the inlet was very unstable and dangerous for navigation. Construction began on the jetties on Mustang and San Jose Islands in the 1880s and took 40 years to complete. Large granite blocks were quarried from Marble Falls, Texas. The South Jetty, on which you are standing, extends approximately ½ mile from the northern tip of Mustang Island into the Gulf of Mexico, and provides stabilization to the entrance of the Corpus Christi Ship Channel. The channel was also dredged at same time the jetties were constructed to allow large ships into Corpus Christi Bay. The project allowed ships to access the port of Corpus Christi and become the major shipping hub it is today.

The exchange of marine waters from the Gulf of Mexico with the waters of Corpus Christi and Aransas Bays occurs mainly through Aransas Pass. Compare the width of Aransas Pass with what you saw at Packery Channel. Also the depth of Aransas Pass is much deeper to allow for the passage of large tankers and container ships into the Corpus Christi Ship Channel. The greater depth and wider channel allow for a much larger volume of water to pass between the Gulf of Mexico and the bays and estuaries with the rising and falling tides.