



**M·O·R·A·E·S**

**OF SOUTH FLORIDA**

**2023 Annual Report**

**S O F L O M O R A E S . C O M**

**Marine  
Order for  
Research and  
Action through  
Environmental  
Stewardship**



# A LETTER FROM THE TEAM

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Dear MORAES Friends, Family and Supporters,

What a difference a year can bring. 2023 brought us so many new experiences, partners, events, individuals, and memories. While it can be hard to capture a year's worth of moments, this report does a pretty good job. So let's dive in!

If we had to describe the major difference between 2022 and 2023 in one word, we'd have to use growth. For anyone who has ever owned or run a business, you can attest to how much work it is. And as you continue to grow, the workload definitely does not decrease. But with that work, time, and effort, you get to see your vision unfold. You get to see the impact you're making. For us, we see it in our research projects, our interns, our volunteers, and even in ourselves.

Growth. In 2023 we added three interns, one for each of our three research projects. We were able to acquire a large grant for each of those three research projects. We incorporated education outreach with our sea turtle monitoring project by partnering with the education team at Frost Science. We optimized our outreach, doubled our number of attended events, and increased our number of received donations. One of our directors was even certified as a drone pilot to assist with our CASP project.

To start something from nothing is scary, and it gets scarier with each progressive year. But eventually there's a point where you can look back and realize you're actually doing it. Slowly, for sure, but it's happening, and it has been happening for the past five years. What MORAES has been able to accomplish thus far has been incredible, and we could not be more excited for what the future holds. Looking into 2024, we have even bigger plans.

As always though, we realize we would not be where we are today without the continued support of everyone we've encountered along the way. In the most sincerest of ways, we thank you. MORAES is the definition of a community effort, and we absolutely love our community.

Sincerely,

*The MORAES Team*

## Meet the Team



Shannon Jones



T.J. Morrell



Kirk Linaje



Stacy Assael

"MORAES was founded to provide people with a chance to follow their passions. As we continue to grow as an organization, we're thrilled to be in a position where we can provide others with that same opportunity"

## Our Mission

**Committed to the understanding, viability, and protection of our local marine environment through conservation, research, and environmental stewardship**

# 2023 MORAES INTERNS

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## Conservation & Communications Intern - James Gamble



James was a graduate student for the Master of Professional Science (MPS) program at the University of Miami studying Marine Conservation. He's currently working at the Phillip and Patricia Frost Museum of Science as an Aquarist where he provides day-to-day care for the animals on exhibit. He believes that MORAES has provided him with the professional work experience to further his dream of working in marine science.

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## Sea Turtle Nesting Survey Intern - Olivia Rasmussen-Dowie

Olivia was a graduate student at the University of Miami's Rosenstiel School pursuing a degree in Marine Conservation. She is originally from Iowa but found her love of the ocean through a variety of volunteer experiences that have taken her all over the world, such as Fiji, Honduras, and South Africa. She enjoys scuba diving, free diving, reading, and spending time with her husband and sweet little puppy, Toast.



## Cetacean Aerial Survey Intern - Kristen Weber



Kristen was a Master of Professional Science student at the University of Miami. Her focus in the master's program was on marine mammal science, with a special interest in marine mammal medicine and conservation. She's originally from Northern California and moved to Miami in 2021 after completing her undergraduate degree in the California Bay Area. She also enjoys surfing, boating, hiking, and running.



## Why MORAES

MORAES is an environmental research organization located in Miami, FL founded with the intent to inspire and retain local marine ecologists. We offer a streamlined path to get involved through applied research, publishing, volunteering, and education outreach. Our goal is to protect our South Florida marine resources through collaborative community involvement and stewardship.

Through grant funding, donations, and the kindness of all our supporters, we have been able to offer internships, scholarships, and research opportunities to assist with habitat restorations, beach cleanups, sea turtle monitoring, cetacean research, and more!

# 2023 Milestones



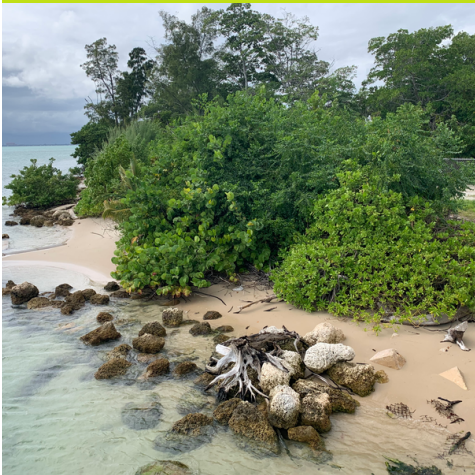
Promoted  
**MORAES** on  
Ballyhoo Boat



Monitored 60+  
sea turtle nests



Initiated three  
student-led  
projects



Acquired funding to  
remove Australian  
Pines from Darwin  
Beach



Optimized the  
outreach table and  
design



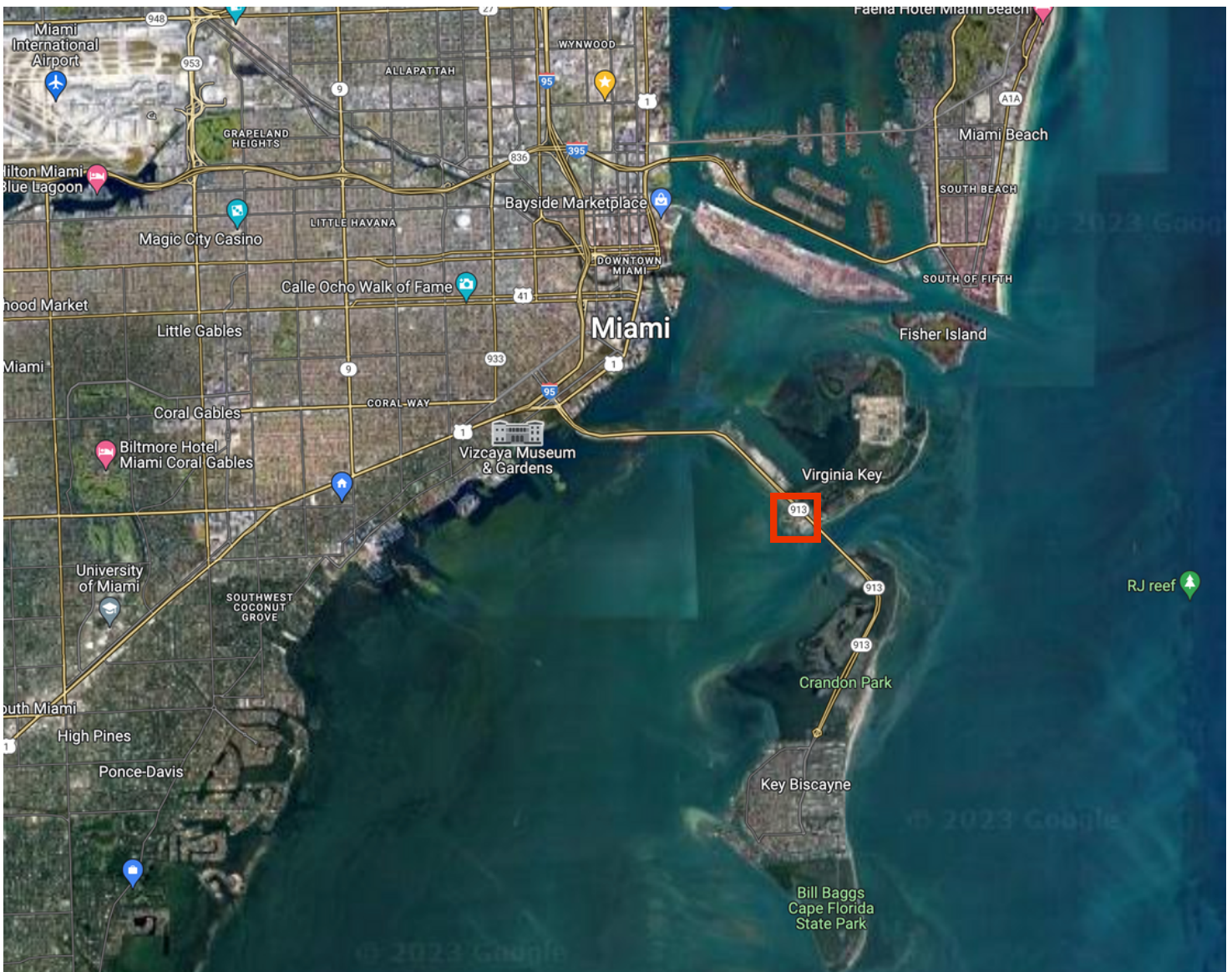
Raised more than  
\$30,000 in  
grants and  
donations

# CURRENT PROJECTS

## EVOLUTION OF DARWIN BEACH

Starting in 2019, MORAES began removing both marine debris and invasive/exotic species from Darwin Beach on Virginia Key. Through native plantings, consistent monitoring, and the efforts of supportive volunteers, the goal was to eventually restore the area to a coastal habitat that accurately represented a healthy coastal upland natural ecosystem.

Invasive and exotic vegetation currently inhabiting Darwin Beach – beach naupaka (*Scaevola taccada*), latherleaf (*Colubrina asiatica*), and Australian pine (*Casuarina equisetifolia*) – have not only prohibited native species such as seagrape (*Coccoloba uvifera*) and green buttonwood (*Conocarpus erectus*) from surviving, but have completely disrupted the beach ecosystem.





# *In 2023 we hosted 3 clean up events at Darwin Beach*

ATTENDED BY

**68**  
volunteers

WHO REMOVED

**370**  
pounds of  
marine debris

AND

**60**  
cubic yards of  
invasive vegetation



## **WHY IS THIS WORK IMPORTANT?**

Coastal native plants have a number of benefits compared to invasive plants, including a need for less water and absence of fertilizer or pesticides. Arguably the most important quality however, especially in South Florida, is their resilience to local weather, including erosion control and preservation of biodiversity. Essentially, native plants help keep the beach together and protect the coast from flooding.

# Thank You to Our Darwin Beach Sponsors!

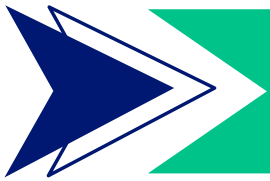


## SURFING'S EVOLUTION & PRESERVATION FOUNDATION

Surfing's Evolution and Preservation Foundation supports organizations with likeminded missions to protect the health of Florida's beaches and address issues such as coastal pollution and beach ecology.

Simply put, MORAES could not have reached our Darwin Beach milestones thus far without the support of Surfing's Evolution and Preservation Foundation.

If you are passionate about healthy, safe, and sustainable coastal beaches in Florida, then visit their site and see how to support them!

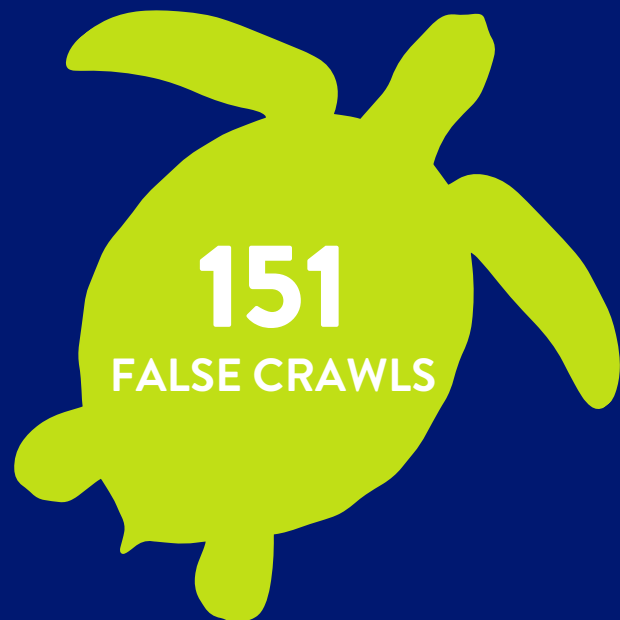
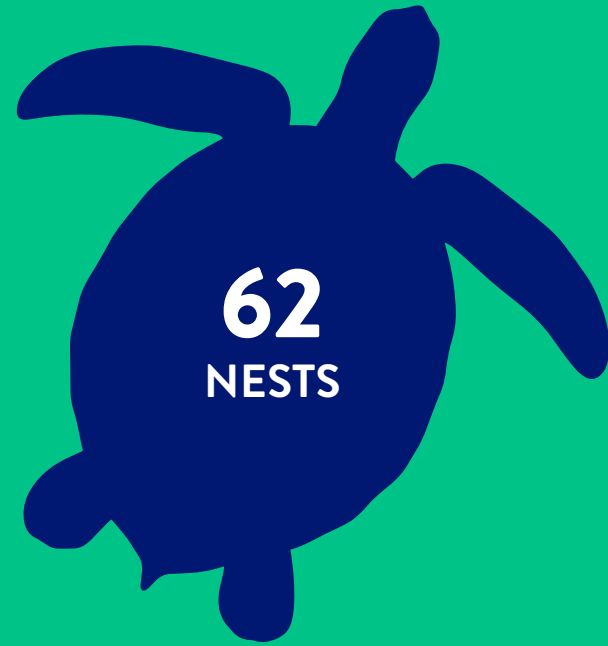


Athletic Brewing Company's mission through their Two for the Trails program is to support organizations that protect and restore local trails and outdoor spaces. Athletic Brewing's Two for the Trails grant has allowed MORAES to make huge strides toward the restoration and enhancement of Darwin Beach on Virginia Key!

From all of us at MORAES, we thank you!

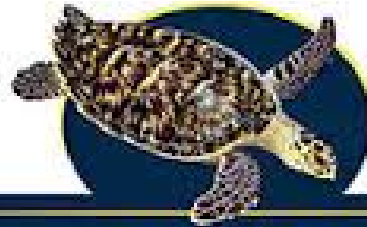
## SEA TURTLE NESTING SURVEYS

Under the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) marine turtle permit MTP-22-153, MORAES helped with Virginia Key sea turtle nesting surveys. Every morning throughout the nesting season (May 1st through October 31st), our trained and permitted team led a group of passionate interns and volunteers across the island's beaches to monitor, track, and document marine sea turtle nesting activity, most of which focus around the loggerhead sea turtle (*Caretta caretta*). The data collected from this seasonal project is imperative to track sea turtle population trends and coordinate the necessary conservation efforts on an annual basis.





**THANK  
YOU!**



**NATIONAL  
SAVE THE SEA TURTLE  
FOUNDATION**

Thank you to the National Save the Sea Turtle Foundation for their continued support of the Sea Turtle Nesting Program at MORAES. Their generous annual funding allows us to keep helping our flippered friends!

The National Save the Sea Turtle Foundation's mission is to “provide educational programming, promote public awareness of Florida's marine ecosystems, and support sea turtle research”.





# New Sea Turtle Programs



## Nest Excavation for Sea Turtles (NEST)

**Interested in joining NEST: 36%**

**52% mentioned learning more about sea turtle nesting**

**58% said they'd change their behaviors for sea turtle conservation**

This was the inaugural year of the NEST program! Surveys were distributed at the end of each program to analyze 'participants' knowledge after attending the program and gauge their conservation awareness.



The education team at Frost Science has partnered with MORAES to run the Nest Excavation for Sea Turtles (NEST) program. Led by permitted professionals, participants have the opportunity to learn about sea turtle nesting and conservation in South Florida and witness the process firsthand right there on the beach!

**FROST**   
**SCIENCE** 

# Adopt a Sea Turtle Nest

Donors of adopted nests received a stake with their name at the nesting site, as well as detailed information about their nest and an update when it hatched!



**DO NOT DISTURB  
SEA TURTLE  
NEST**

**VIOLATORS SUBJECT TO FINES  
AND IMPRISONMENT**

**Florida Law  
Chapter 379.2431(1)**  
No person may take, possess, disturb, mutilate, destroy, cause to be destroyed, sell, offer for sale, transport, receive, or harass any marine turtle or its nest or eggs at any time.  
Upon conviction, a person may be imprisoned for a period of up to 60 days or fined up to \$500, or both, plus an additional penalty of \$100 for each sea turtle nest destroyed or taken.

**U.S. Endangered Species Act of 1973**  
No person may take, harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, or capture any marine turtle, turtle nest, and/or eggs, or attempt to engage in any such conduct.  
Any person who knowingly violates any provision of this act may be assessed a civil penalty up to \$25,000 or a criminal penalty up to \$100,000 and up to one year imprisonment.

Should you witness a violation, observe an injured or stranded turtle, or misoriented hatchlings, please contact FWC at 888-406-FWCC (3922).  
\*FWC or #FWC.

FLORIDA  
**TUR TLE**  
Department of Natural Resources



  
**MORAES**  
OF SEAS & SHORES

**Adopt A Sea Turtle Nest**

This nest has been symbolically adopted by:  
Caitlin Yancy ♡

Want to adopt a sea turtle nest?  
Visit [www.seaformores.com](http://www.seaformores.com) to learn about our conservation efforts and support sea turtle conservation.



All marine turtle activities conducted under Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Marine Turtle Permit 153. It is prohibited to take fish limits under federal law. All proceeds benefit MORAES 501(c)(3) marine conservation efforts.

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# CETACEAN AERIAL SURVEY PROJECT

Cetacean Aerial Survey Project (CASP) collaborates with Dolphin Research Center (DRC) located on Grassy Key, Florida. DRC graciously opened their doors (or more accurately their lagoons) to allow MORAES to perform a research project focused on collecting marine mammal data through the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), or more commonly referred to as drones. With the incorporation of UAVs into the field of researching marine mammals, countless possibilities can now be considered as a result of their versatility and the scope of data collection can be broadened dramatically. MORAES has officially moved offshore as we continue to test these applications on wild cetacean species in Biscayne Bay.

**5 HOURS OF  
DRONE FLIGHT  
TIME**

**4  
BOAT SURVEYS**

**2 CASP RELATED  
PRESENTATIONS  
GIVEN**



“Through education, research and rescue, Dolphin Research Center promotes peaceful coexistence, cooperation and communication between marine mammals, humans and the environment we share with the well being of DRC’s animals taking precedence.”



## PODCAST

Kirk was asked to join the "Los Pichy Boys" podcast on July 26, 2023, to discuss the sightings of orcas off of the Florida Keys. Recorded in Miami, this is the largest Spanish-based podcast in the country.

## Drone Certification

Co-founder Kirk Linaje, received his drone certification through the Florida Aviation Association (FAA)



# Virginia Key Beach Clean-Up



February 25

23  
Volunteers

Darwin  
Beach

MORAES hosted a beach clean-up for the student council members of David Fairchild Elementary. The 4th and 5th graders, along with their parents, removed more than 250 pounds of debris from our beautiful shorelines.



# SEAS Beach Clean-Up



April 2

20  
Volunteers

Miami  
Beach

This event celebrated students who successfully finished their swimming class by taking morning surf lessons with Miami Surf Rider. To cap it off, Debris Free Oceans, which inspires local communities to eradicate marine debris from our beaches, reefs, and oceans, led the students in an educational beach cleanup.

# City Nature Challenge



April 28

35  
Volunteers

Darwin  
Beach

MORAES partnered with Rescue a Reef, Salt Waterfront Restaurant, and City Nature Challenge to get children and adults alike involved in observing the unique nature and biodiversity on Darwin Beach. We were able to host a beach cleanup and offer attendees a chance to win some fun prizes in a raffle.



# Miami Beach Turtle Fest



April 29

3,000  
Guests

Miami  
Beach

MORAES partnered with Miami Beach Rising Above to spread awareness of our current projects and mission. Through citizen science and volunteering, we hope to provide more people with opportunities to get involved with their local environment!

# IGNITE Conference



May 11

400  
Guests

Downtown  
Miami

The 2023 IGNITE conference is the largest annual convention of nonprofit organizations in South Florida. The purpose of the conference is to bring nonprofit organizations together to improve fundraising strategies and boosting engagement and collaboration.



# MUVE & MORAES



May 20

60  
Volunteers

Haulover  
Beach

MUVE's purpose was to plant sea oats to restore the damaged areas of sand dunes and create a stretch of resilient shoreline. Sea oats are essential to maintaining and building sand dunes in South Florida. Together, we helped plant 1,500 sea oats in just 2 hours!

# World Sea Turtle Day



June 17

23  
Volunteers

Haulover  
Park

Miami-Dade Sea Turtles hosted their first annual World Sea Turtle Day event at Haulover Beach. This was a great opportunity for MORAES staff and interns to promote our organization and ongoing research projects while highlighting our sea turtle monitoring project and Adopt-A-Nest program.



# Tito's Outreach Virginia Key



July 24

5  
Guests

Virginia Key

Tito's Handmade Vodka Co. visited Historic Virginia Key Beach to learn more about our sea turtle conservation. MORAES' Sea Turtle Conservation team led an inspiring overview of our program and described the importance of monitoring nesting sea turtles and hatchlings on Virginia Key Beach, as well as the connection between marine debris and sea turtle survival.



# Turtle Outreach for Students



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OF SOUTH FLORIDA



September 13

15  
Students

Central Park  
Elementary  
School

The incredible, smart, and eager third graders at Central Park Elementary attended a virtual visit with the MORAES Sea Turtle Project intern, Olivia Rasmussen-Dowie to learn about the different species of sea turtles in South Florida, sea turtle nesting, and the threats many sea turtles face.



# International Coastal Cleanup Day



September 16

40  
Volunteers

Darwin  
Beach

At Darwin Beach on Virginia Key, our dedicated volunteers picked up a total of 265 lbs of trash, helping to contribute to the 22,233 lbs of trash that were picked up around Miami-Dade as part of International Coastal Cleanup Day

# Non-profit Executive Alliance



October 12

200  
Guests

Miami-Dade  
College - North  
Campus

The NEA invites new and existing CEO members along with their Preferred Consultants and Community Partners to join in their official expansion into Miami and Monroe counties. This meeting was kicked-off with a few words of encouragement from Miami-Dade Mayor Cava.



# Beach Cleanup + Kickball For a Cause



October 14

60  
Participants

Virginia Key  
Beach Park

Debris Free Oceans, Plastic Fisherman, and the 2022 returning champs, Rescue a Reef joined MORAES as we cleaned our beaches, competed on the kickball field, and did so without contributing any plastic to the park.

# Give Miami Day



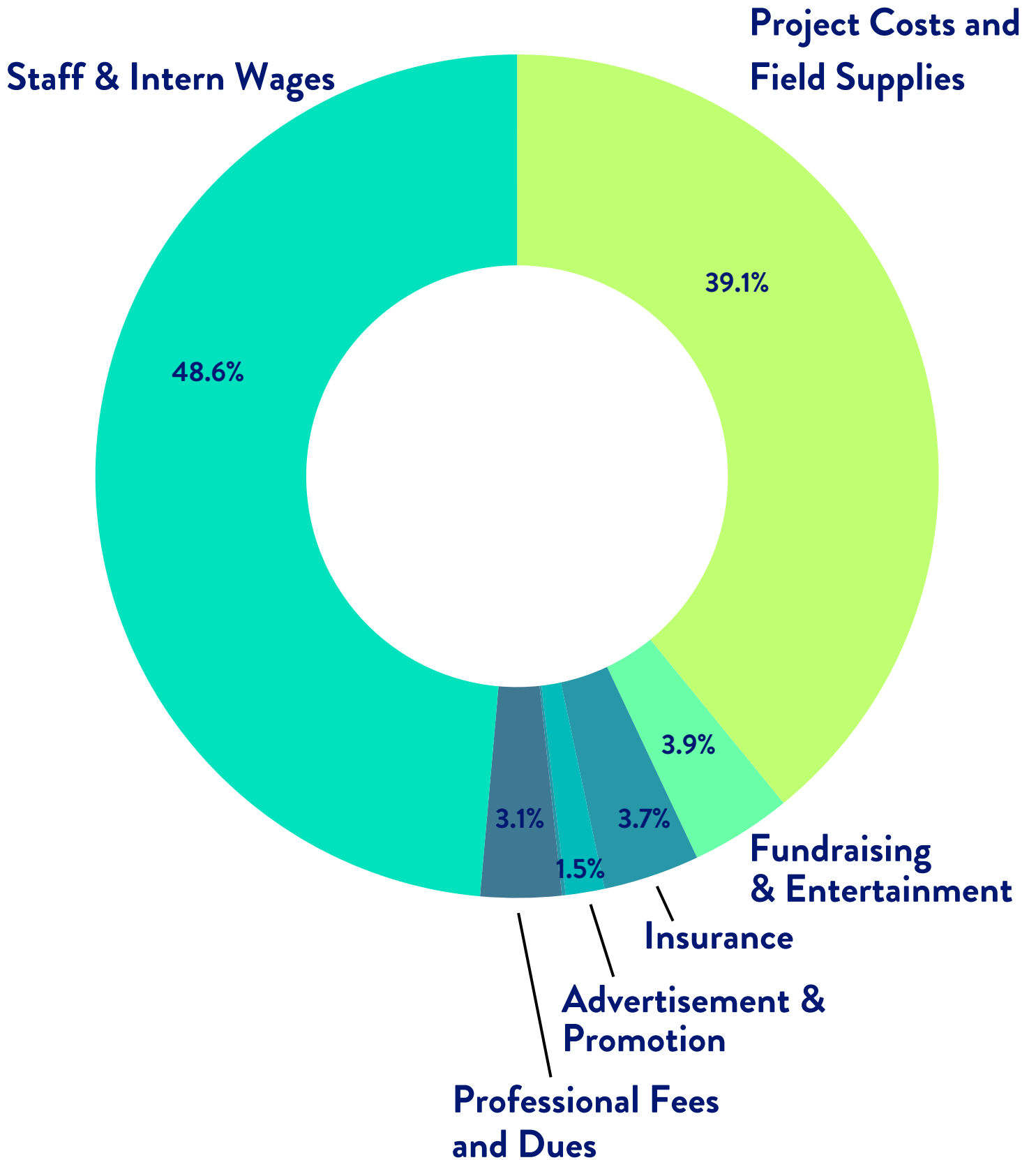
November 16

75  
Guests

Harry's  
Pizzeria

MORAES celebrated Give Miami Day, which is one of the nation's biggest online 24-hour giving events. Hosted at Harry's Pizza in Coconut Grove, a total of \$3,500 worth of prizes were donated to MORAES and awarded to raffle winners.

# [2023 Expenses Breakdown]



# IN 2024 WE PLAN TO DO A WHOLE LOT MOR[AES]...

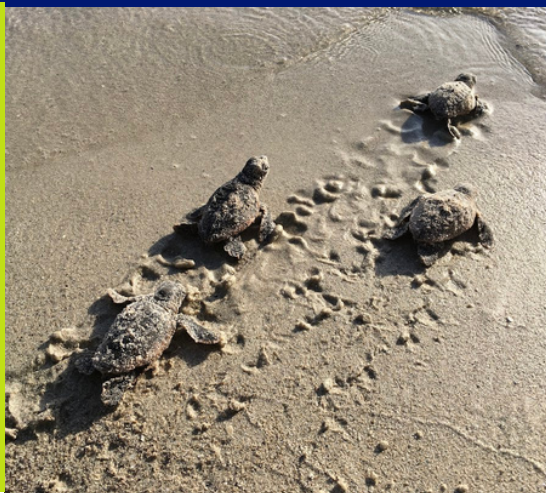
**Complete  
Website  
Renovation**

**Streamline  
Outreach Even  
More**



**Raise more than \$10k on  
Give Miami Day**

**Publish One  
New Scientific  
Paper**



**Create  
Sponsorship  
Package**

# Organize, Apply to, & Receive More Grants

Expand Beach  
Enhancement  
Efforts to New  
Site

Increase Number of Field  
Days with DRC

Streamline the  
Internship Process  
and Bring on Two  
New Interns

Strategize  
Partnership  
Collaborations





**THANK YOU TO EVERYONE WHO  
MADE THIS YEAR POSSIBLE**

**Surfing's Evolution and Preservation Foundation**

**National Save the Sea Turtle Foundation**

**Ocaquatics**

**Bass Pro Shops**

**Wild Lime Adventures**

**Tito's Handmade Vodka**

**Salt**

**Blue Scholars**

**Monopolio**

**Eagle Brands**

**1% for the Planet**

**Harry's Pizzeria**

**RSLVE Outfitters**

**Dolphin Research Center**

**Rescue a Reef**

**Sustainable Events Network**

**The Rounds**

**Miami Seaquarium**

**Reel Ocean**

**Grateful Diver**

**Fillabag**

**Hotel St. Michel**

**International Coastal Cleanup**

**VolunteerCleanup.org**

**The Billfish Foundation**

**The Miami Foundation**

**Butterfly World**

**Flamingo Garden**

**Waterlust**

**Ron Jon Surf Shop**

**Saving the Seas**

**Box IQ**

**Let's Roam**

**Barnacle Society**

**Calusa Club**

**City Nature Challenge**

**Florida Panthers**

**Four Seasons**

**Little Brewing Company**

**Lynker**

**Nomadix**

**Pub Grill**

**RepYourWater**

**SEAMAMMs**

**Swamped in the Glades**

**Tom Bihn**

**Wines for Humanity**

**Barkbox**

**Nomadix**

**Benihana**

**AND OF COURSE ALL OF THE GENEROUS INDIVIDUALS  
WHO HAVE MADE PRIVATE DONATIONS**

