Recommendations for Sampling Effort of Vegetation Communities in the Critical Coastal Habitat Assessment

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## Acknowledgements

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## Executive Summary

The Critical Coastal Habitat Assessment (CCHA) is a long-term monitoring program to track the potential effects of climate change on emergent tidal wetlands in Tampa Bay. Nine sites are sampled every three to five years along transects that extend landward from the shoreline. The surveys assess characteristics of the vegetation communities, vegetation zones, tree communities, surface elevation, soil characteristics, interstitial porewater salinity, and faunal communities. Vegetation communities are sampled every half meter along the transect and these surveys are the most time-intensive component of the CCHA. The CCHA is expected to continue for several decades and optimizing the sample design for the vegetation communities is critical for long-term sustainability of the monitoring program.

This report evaluates the effect of reduced sampling on key metrics of the vegetation community to identify if reduced effort is possible without compromising quality of the data. Existing surveys collected at half meter sampling were systematically down-sampled using a custom software routine. Estimates of species richness at each site, species richness within vegetation zones, elevation estimates of key species, and ability to identify and characterize vegetation zones were obtained for sub-sampled surveys from 1 meter to 10 meter sampling at half-meter intervals.

Conclusions from the analysis are as follows:

* Richness estimates for a site are reduced with lower sample effort
* The amount of reduction in the richness estimates was weakly associated with total species richness at a site
* Richness estimates for a zone are reduced with lower sample effort
* Richness estimates will be lower with reduced effort for zones with high richness
* Elevation estimates of mangroves will change with reduced effort, although patterns varied by site
* All vegetation zones at a site can be identified if the sample interval is less than the length of the smallest zone at a site
* Precision of the distance estimates for each vegetation zone decreases with reductions in sample effort

All of the above changes apply to reductions in effort for sampling vegetation up to 10 meters, or a 95% reduction in relative effort. A reduction in effort by 50%, or sampling every meter, does not significantly affect the key metrics described above. As such, the quantitative assessments included in this report support a recommendation that 1 meter sampling can be used at all site transects for future surveys without compromising the ability to track long-term changes in vegetation communities in the CCHA.

Additional information supporting this report can be found online at <https://tbep-tech.github.io/ccha-sampling-effort>.

## 1 Introduction

Native coastal habitats provide multiple ecosystem services that benefit natural communities and human-based uses of the resources. Climate change and sea-level rise are critical threats to the health and resilience of these habitats. Changes with projected estimates of sea-level rise and temperature changes are expected to manifest as substantial habitat loss or alteration and landward migration of intertidal species. Mangroves, salt marshes, and salt barrens are collectively referred to as emergent tidal wetlands and are expected to be disproportionately altered by climate change (Sherwood and Greening, 2012; Cavanaugh et al., 2019; Osland et al., 2022). Alteration of these communities may contribute to reduced shoreline stability, increased vulnerability to flooding, changes in water quality, and decreased fisheries production (Kennedy, 1990; Duarte et al., 2013; Gilby et al., 2020). These negative changes may translate to losses of recreational or economic opportunities of those that live in or near coastal environments (Spalding et al., 2014; Toimil et al., 2018).

The Tampa Bay region (Florida, USA) has been identified as one of the most vulnerable areas worldwide to the effects of climate change due to its shallow topography and dense urban population living near the coast (Sherwood and Greening, 2014; Fu et al., 2016). Projections of sea-level rise for Tampa Bay suggest an increase of two to 8.5 feet by the year 2100 (Burke et al., 2019), potentially inundating low-lying coastal areas with emergent tidal wetlands and impacting critical infrastructure. Numerous efforts to track and plan for the projected effects of sea-level rise have been the focus of regional managers in recent decades. The Tampa Bay Estuary Program (TBEP) works to develop science-based solutions to managing the estuary by creating consensus among regional managers on approaches for maintaining a healthy bay and watershed. The TBEP Habitat Master Plan (HMP) (Robison et al., 2020) provides coverage targets and goals for all native habitats in the bay, with specific focus on intertidal habitats that are especially vulnerable to climate change and coastal development. These targets and goals are based on coverages that are likely to be achieved based on past restoration efforts, available remaining areas for acquisition, and trajectories of land use change for the prior decades.

The Critical Coastal Habitat Assessment (CCHA) complements the HMP by providing high-resolution surveys of emergent tidal wetlands (Moyer and Radabaugh, 2017; Price et al., 2017). Unlike the HMP that is based primarily on remote sensing products, the CCHA provides field-based estimates of coastal habitats at fixed sites for selected locations around Tampa Bay ([Figure 1](#fig-sitemap)). Each of nine sites are sampled every 3-5 years using a transect design extending landward from the water to survey vegetation and tree communities, surface elevation, soil characteristics, interstitial porewater salinity, and faunal communities. The surveys also track discrete vegetation zones (e.g., mangrove fringe, coastal uplands, etc.) to assess potential landward shifts or reductions in habitats based on anticipated changes from sea-level rise and increased temperatures. To date, two rounds of sampling have been completed. The first baseline surveys were conducted in 2015 and 2016 (Moyer and Radabaugh, 2017; Price et al., 2017) and a second set of surveys was conducted in 2018.

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| Figure 1: Locations of long-term monitoring sites in Tampa Bay surveyed for the Critical Coastal Habitat Assessment. Each site has been sampled twice as of this report. |

The CCHA surveys are expected to be conducted over the next several decades based on the timeline of likely changes to coastal habitats from climate change (Sherwood and Greening, 2012; Burke et al., 2019). The feasibility of continued surveys depends on the relative effort of collecting useful information that informs understanding of regional effects of sea-level rise and temperature change. The vegetation surveys are a core component of the field efforts that collect information on species richness and cover at each site and within each vegetation zone. Current effort is time-intensive and requires sampling vegetation within a 0.25 m quadrat every half meter along a transect, where the mean length of transects is approximately 150 meters. Understanding the quality of data provided by the vegetation surveys at reduced sampling effort will inform the level of effort required for future sampling.

This report evaluates the effect of reduced sample effort on key metrics for vegetation transects at all CCHA monitoring sites in Tampa Bay. A central hypothesis is that the current sampling effort using quadrats every half meter is not necessary to provide a robust assessment of the vegetation communities and a reduction of effort is possible without sacrificing the quality of information in the survey. A recommendation of reduced effort is expected to increase the likelihood that surveys will be completed in the future if less time and resources are required for field sampling. A desktop analysis was conducted to sub-sample the existing surveys from 1 meter (50% reduction in effort) to 10 meter (95% reduction in effort) sampling at half meter intervals. Scenarios evaluating more than 50% (1 meter sampling) or 66% (1.5 meter sampling) reduction in effort are unrealistic, but still useful to understand the effects on quantitative measures of habitat. Key metrics describing the vegetation communities were evaluated for each sub-sampled survey and compared to the original estimates at half-meter sampling. Key metrics were evaluated based on information that was considered relevant to evaluate the long-term effects of climate change. These metrics included:

1. Total species richness at a site
2. Total species richness by vegetation zone across sites
3. Elevation at which 95% of key species occur (e.g., mangroves)
4. Vegetation zone identification and lengths by site

Recommendations are provided for the appropriate sampling interval of future surveys.

## 2 Methods

The current sampling design used at each CCHA site is shown in [Figure 2](#fig-transectdesign). The transects are perpendicular to the coastline and extend from the water to upland habitats using bench-marked beginning and end locations that are fixed at each site. The vegetation community is surveyed at half-meter marks using a 0.25 m quadrat, where species richness and basal cover of each species are enumerated. Additional information collected at each transect includes tree surveys in 1 m quadrats (red boxes, [Figure 2](#fig-transectdesign)) using the Point-Center-Quarter method (Cottam and Curtis, 1956), elevation surveys along the length of the transect using Real Time Kinematic (RTK) satellite navigation via GPS, porewater interstitial salinity within each vegetation zone, feldspar horizons and soil samples analyzed for total percent organic content and sediment grain size, and faunal surveys at random plots evaluating species composition and burrow density of crabs (*Uca* spp.) and snails (*Littorina* spp.). Locations of the vegetation zones and the transitions between them are visually assessed and the meter marks are recorded where the transitions occur.

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| Figure 2: Schematic of the sampling design at all CCHA sites (from Moyer and Radabaugh, 2017). Vegetation quadrats (hollow black boxes) are placed every half meter along the main transect from the water to the landward end. |

All existing CCHA vegetation surveys at each site and for both phases of sampling (baseline and 2018 surveys) were sub-sampled from the existing effort of sample plots every half meter. [Figure 3](#fig-subsampex) shows an example of the sub-sampling scheme, where effort was reduced in increments of a half meter, starting from the complete survey to an upper limit of sampling every 10 meters. For simplicity, [Figure 3](#fig-subsampex) shows sub-sampling up to every three meters for a hypothetical 30 meter transect (mean transect length across all sites is approximately 150 meters). The top row represents the complete existing survey as the basis of comparison for the metrics estimated from the sub-sampled datasets in the rows below. The existing surveys were sub-sampled at the specified meter interval for every unique subset (or replicate) that was possible. For example, two unique replicates can be created with sub-sampling every meter, three every 1.5 meters, etc. The large red points in [Figure 3](#fig-subsampex) show which of the existing survey points were sampled for each replicate at the specified sub-sample distance.

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| Figure 3: Schematic of the method for creating sub-samples of existing transect data. The full survey with sampling at half-meter intervals is shown at the top, with increasing sampling intervals from top to bottom. Replicates for each sample interval show the unique points that were selected. |

The relative reduction in effort associated with each half-meter increase along a transect is shown with [Figure 4](#fig-releff). The rate of the percent reduction of the original effort with each half-meter reduction in sample effort decreases from 1 meter to 10 meter sampling, with the largest reduction occurring on the left-side of the x-axis (e.g., half-meter to 1 meter sampling) and the smallest reductions on the right side of the x-axis (e.g., 9.5 meter to 10 meter sampling).

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| Figure 4: Percent reductions in sample effort as a function of the sample interval. For example, sampling every 1 meter represents a 50% reduction in effort from half-meter sampling. |

For each site and sample year, relevant vegetation metrics were estimated from the vegetation transect that was sub-sampled following the methods above. Estimates of species richness at each site and species richness in each vegetation zone were calculated for each sub-sample. The elevations at which key species occurred were also estimated for each level of sampling effort. Three mangrove species that commonly occur in tidal wetlands in Florida (red mangroves, *Rhizophore mangle*, white mangroves, *Laguncularia racemosa*, and black mangroves, *Avicennia germinans*) were assessed as key species expected to be affected by climate change (e.g., landward expansion to higher elevation, colonization of salt marshes and salt barrens, and changes in species distributions, Comeaux et al., 2012; Osland et al., 2022). Elevation estimates from the RTK surveys were combined with the vegetation data and cumulative distribution functions (CDF) of the elevations were calculated for all points in a sub-sample where a key species was found. The 95th percentile of the elevation estimates for each CDF were used to identify an approximate elevation limit for each species and sub-sample. Lastly, the number of unique zones at each site and the meter mark at which a zone began were also estimated from each sub-sample.

All replicates for each level of sampling effort were considered independent samples and results of each summary metric were averaged across replicates to provide a single estimate for the level of effort. The variance across the estimates was also estimated to describe how each metric varied depending on the level of effort and which meter mark was chosen as the start of the transect. For most metrics, additional characteristics of the data were also evaluated to identify potential factors that contributed to the greatest changes with reductions in effort. For example, estimates at sites with many rare species and potentially higher species richness may be disproportionately affected by reductions in sample effort (Miller and Ambrose, 2000; Zhang et al., 2019). Metrics were evaluated as total change and the relative percent change from the initial value at half-meter sampling to identify these potential effects. Metrics were also evaluated by comparing total change from half-meter to 10 meter sampling as a function of site-level characteristics, e.g., total richness.

All analyses were conducted using the R Statistical Programming Language (R Core Team, 2022) using custom routines created by the authors. Analysis workflows, source data, and additional online content are available at <https://github.com/tbep-tech/ccha-sampling-effort>.

## 3 Results

### 3.1 Richness estimates

Total richness estimates at each site and for each year of sampling decreased as expected with reductions in effort ([Figure 5](#fig-richex)). The rate of reduction in the richness estimates decreased as the sampling intervals increased, in agreement with the level of effort as a percentage of the total shown in [Figure 4](#fig-releff). Each point in [Figure 5](#fig-richex) is the average estimate across replicates for the sampling distance shown on the x-axis. The lines are polynomial smooths to show the trend and the size of each point is in proportion to the variance of the species richness estimate across the replicates. The subplots are arranged left to right, top to bottom based on the greatest reduction in species richness as a percentage of the total. Tabular results for selected sampling intervals in [Figure 5](#fig-richex) are shown in Table .

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| Figure 5: Reductions in species richness estimates with sampling distance for all sites and each year of sampling. Point size shows the variance across the replicates for each level of sampling effort. |

**Table** **:** Reductions in species richness estimates with selected sampling distances for all sites and each year of sampling. The total species richness is shown for the complete surveys at half meter sampling and the mean species richness plus the percent reduction in parentheses are shown for reduced effort in the remaining columns.

|  | | Sample interval every x meters | | | | | | | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Site | Year | 0.5 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| Big Bend - TECO |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | 1 | 21 | 18 (14) | 15 (29) | 13.8 (34) | 12.2 (42) | 11.8 (44) | 11.3 (46) | 10.6 (49) | 10.2 (51) | 10.1 (52) | 9.7 (54) |
|  | 2 | 24 | 22 (8) | 19.2 (20) | 16.7 (31) | 15.8 (34) | 14.4 (40) | 13.8 (43) | 13.1 (45) | 12.4 (48) | 11.8 (51) | 11.6 (52) |
| Cockroach Bay |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | 1 | 23 | 20 (13) | 17.5 (24) | 15.8 (31) | 15 (35) | 14 (39) | 13.6 (41) | 12.8 (44) | 12.4 (46) | 12.2 (47) | 11.4 (50) |
|  | 2 | 16 | 14.5 (9) | 12.8 (20) | 12.5 (22) | 12.1 (24) | 11.7 (27) | 11.1 (31) | 10.6 (34) | 10.4 (35) | 10 (38) | 9.9 (38) |
| Fort DeSoto |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | 1 | 30 | 29 (3) | 24.5 (18) | 22.7 (24) | 19.4 (35) | 18.5 (38) | 17.6 (41) | 16.4 (45) | 15.2 (49) | 14.9 (50) | 14.3 (52) |
|  | 2 | 29 | 24.5 (16) | 20.2 (30) | 18 (38) | 16.2 (44) | 15.1 (48) | 14.6 (50) | 13.6 (53) | 13 (55) | 12.4 (57) | 12.1 (58) |
| Harbor Palms |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | 1 | 14 | 14 (0) | 13.5 (4) | 12.8 (8) | 12.6 (10) | 12.7 (9) | 12.2 (13) | 12 (14) | 11.9 (15) | 11.4 (18) | 11.3 (19) |
|  | 2 | 19 | 17 (11) | 16 (16) | 14.7 (23) | 14 (26) | 13.4 (29) | 13.2 (30) | 12.6 (34) | 12.1 (36) | 11.7 (38) | 11.8 (38) |
| Hidden Harbor |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | 1 | 14 | 13 (7) | 10.8 (23) | 9.3 (33) | 8.4 (40) | 7.9 (44) | 7.4 (47) | 6.6 (53) | 6.2 (55) | 6 (57) | 5.7 (60) |
|  | 2 | 21 | 17 (19) | 13.2 (37) | 11.2 (47) | 9.6 (54) | 8.5 (60) | 7.8 (63) | 7.3 (65) | 6.6 (68) | 6.1 (71) | 5.8 (72) |
| Little Manatee River |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | 1 | 12 | 11.5 (4) | 10.8 (10) | 9.3 (22) | 7.8 (35) | 6.7 (44) | 6.3 (47) | 5.8 (52) | 5.3 (56) | 4.8 (60) | 4.7 (61) |
|  | 2 | 11 | 10 (9) | 8 (27) | 7 (36) | 6 (45) | 5.4 (51) | 5.1 (54) | 4.6 (58) | 4.4 (60) | 4.1 (63) | 3.8 (65) |
| Mosaic |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | 1 | 11 | 10.5 (5) | 10.2 (7) | 9.3 (15) | 8.6 (22) | 8.1 (26) | 7.8 (30) | 7.4 (33) | 7.3 (34) | 7.1 (35) | 7 (37) |
|  | 2 | 9 | 8 (11) | 7 (22) | 6.2 (31) | 5.8 (36) | 5.4 (40) | 5.2 (43) | 4.9 (45) | 4.7 (48) | 4.6 (49) | 4.4 (51) |
| Upper Tampa Bay Park |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | 1 | 39 | 35.5 (9) | 31 (21) | 27.5 (29) | 25.5 (35) | 23.1 (41) | 21.4 (45) | 20.6 (47) | 19.5 (50) | 18.6 (52) | 17.6 (55) |
|  | 2 | 36 | 32.5 (10) | 27.8 (23) | 24.7 (31) | 23 (36) | 21.6 (40) | 19.8 (45) | 19.2 (47) | 18.2 (49) | 17.6 (51) | 16.8 (53) |
| Weedon Island |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | 1 | 30 | 27 (10) | 21.5 (28) | 19.2 (36) | 17.9 (40) | 16.5 (45) | 15 (50) | 14.5 (52) | 13.9 (54) | 13.3 (56) | 12.6 (58) |
|  | 2 | 27 | 23 (15) | 19.5 (28) | 17.3 (36) | 15.8 (42) | 14.3 (47) | 13.2 (51) | 12.3 (54) | 11.9 (56) | 11.6 (57) | 11 (59) |

[Figure 6](#fig-richperex) shows similar results as [Figure 5](#fig-richex), except richness is scaled as a percentage of the total at each site for full sampling effort. This plot allows a comparison of a reduction in the estimate independent of the overall species richness because the sensitivity of the change may vary depending on the total. The greatest percent reductions in the richness estimates with decreased sampling were observed at the Little Manatee River and Hidden Harbor sites.

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| Figure 6: Relative percent reductions in species richness estimates with sampling distance for all sites and each year of sampling. Point size shows the variance across the replicates for each level of sampling effort. |

An assessment of percent loss in the richness estimates from half-meter to 10 meter sampling as a function of total species richness is shown in [Figure 7](#fig-richloss). This plot tests the assumption that estimates at sites with higher species richness will be affected more strongly be reductions in effort. There is some evidence that a greater reduction in species richness is expected at sites with higher richness, although a linear regression fit through the points shows the model is insignificant.

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| Figure 7: Total percent loss in species richness estimates from 0.5 to 10 meter sampling as a function of actual species richness at half-meter sampling. |

### 3.2 Richness estimates by zone

Similar to the richness estimates at each site, an assessment of changes with reduction in effort was also observed within the unique vegetation zones observed across all sites ([Figure 8](#fig-richzone)). A total of 28 unique zones were sampled across the nine sites. The lines show the estimated reduction in the richness estimate for zones at each site and the thick line is the average trend for each zone across sites (points are not shown to reduce clutter). As for the site-level assessments, the rate of reduction decreased with increasing sampling distance within each zone. The subplots are arranged left to right, top to bottom based on the greatest reduction in species richness as a percentage of the total. The highest overall richness was observed in the transitional marsh zone at Cockroach Bay (20 species in the first phase of sampling) and coastal upland zone at Weedon Island (19 species in the first phase of sampling). Consequently, the zones at these sites had large decreases in total richness with reduced effort. Conversely, aquatic zones (channel, freshwater pond, and tidal creek) had very little vegetation (*Juncus roemerianus* or *Blutaparon vermiculare*) and did not show any changes with reduction in effort, as expected. Changes in richness with reduced effort varied considerably for the coastal uplands, where total richness differed by site (highest at Weedon Island, lowest at Little Manatee River).

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| Figure 8: Reductions in species richness estimates with sampling distance for each unique vegetation zone across all sites. Each line is a unique site and sample year. The black line shows the average trend for the zone. Panels are arranged based on the greatest percent reduction in richness from full to minimum effort. |

[Figure 9](#fig-richzoneper) shows similar results as [Figure 8](#fig-richzone), except richness is scaled as a percentage of the total within a zone at full sampling effort. This plot allows a comparison of a reduction in the estimate independent of the overall species richness. The greatest percent reduction in the richness estimate with decreased sampling was observed in the coastal upland zone at Weedon Island (over 80% loss), which also had the second highest total species richness.

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| Figure 9: Relative percent reductions in species richness estimates with sampling distance for each unique vegetation zone across all sites. Each line is a unique site and year. The black line shows the average trend for the zone. Panels are arranged based on the greatest percent reduction in richness from full to minimum effort. |

[Figure 10](#fig-richzonesum) combines results from [Figure 9](#fig-richzoneper) into a single panel, showing only the average percent loss for all sites in each zone (i.e., the black lines in [Figure 9](#fig-richzoneper)). The line thickness is in proportion to the average total species richness for all sites in a zone at full sampling effort. Line thickness generally increases from top to bottom at the 10 meter mark, providing evidence that percent loss in the estimate is a function of richness. An alternative depiction of this relationship is shown in [Figure 11](#fig-richzoneloss), where a linear fit of total percent loss from half-meter to 10 meter sampling versus average species richness by zone was significant (*p* < 0.05).

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| Figure 10: Relative percent reduction in species richness with sampling distance for each unique vegetation zone across all sites. Each line represents the average percent reduction for each occurrence of a zone. Line thickness and opacity is in proportion to mean total richness in each zone across sites and years. |

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| Figure 11: Total percent loss of richness from half-meter to 10 meter sampling as a function of average species richness within a zone. |

### 3.3 Elevation of key species

Elevation estimates at which 95% of mangrove species were observed with reductions in sampling effort varied by site ([Figure 12](#fig-elevex)). Consistent reductions in the elevation estimates were observed for all species at some sites (e.g., Fort De Soto, Mosaic), whereas only some species showed reductions at some sites (e.g., only *Rhizophore mangle* at Big Bend - Teco). Additionally, the overall elevations at half-meter sampling varied by species at each site, such that red mangroves which typically are found closer to the shoreline were observed at higher (Big Bend, Little Manatee River) or lower (Cockroach Bay, Mosaic, Upper Tampa Bay Park) estimates than the other two species. The variance in the estimated elevation across all species generally increased with reductions in sampling effort.

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| Figure 12: Elevation estimates of three mangrove species with sampling distance at each site. Point size shows the variance across the replicates for each level of sampling effort. |

The total change in the elevation estimates as a percentage of the original was strongly influenced by overall frequency occurrence of each species at a site ([Figure 13](#fig-foperelevex), *p* < 0.05). Species with greater frequency occurrence at a site have smaller changes in the elevation estimates with reductions in sampling effort. Similarly, lower variance among the estimates was observed for species with higher frequency occurrences ([Figure 14](#fig-fovarelevex), *p* < 0.05).

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| Figure 13: Total percent change in elevation estimates for three mangrove species from half-meter to 10 meter sampling as a function of actual frequency occurrence of each species at half-meter sampling. |

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| Figure 14: Variance of the elevation esimates of three mangrove species at 10 meter sampling as a function of actual frequency occurrence of each species at half-meter sampling. |

### 3.4 Zone identification

The number of unique vegetation zones along each transect varied among the sites, with a maximum of twelve zones at Upper Tampa Bay Park and a minimum of four zones at Hidden Harbor. The minimum zone length observed was 1 meter for the tidal creek zone at Hidden Harbor and the maximum zone length was 102 meters for the *Juncus* marsh zone at Little Manatee River. Mean zone length across all sites was 23 meters. An assessment of the ability to sample all of the zones at a site with reduced sampling effort showed that most but not all of the zones can be identified up to sampling every 10 meters ([Figure 15](#fig-zonecnt)). Each zone could be identified at any level of sample effort for Big Bend - TECO, Fort DeSoto, and Harbor Palms, whereas some zones were missed for the other sites depending on the sampling interval. For example, Hidden Harbor includes four zones, with the smallest as 1 meter in length. An average zone count of less than four occurs when the sampling interval is greater than 1 meter, i.e, 1.5 meters, which misses the tidal creek zone for some of the replicates. The length of the smallest zone for sites where the average count begins to decrease with reduced effort can be seen at the point where the curve is no longer constant at the true zone count. As such, all zones will be identified if the sampling interval is less than the length of the smallest zone.

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| Figure 15: Number of unique zones identified at each site from half-meter to 10 meter sampling. Point size shows the variance across the replicates for each level of sampling effort. |

Estimated lengths of each zone did not change systematically, although the variance of the estimates increased with reduced sampling effort ([Figure 16](#fig-zonedst)). The change in variance was non-linear, such that it generally increased with reduced effort, but often was estimated at low or zero values depending on the sample interval. An example from Big Bend - TECO demonstrates how variance changes across each zone with the sampling effort ([Figure 17](#fig-zonevarex)). The total zone length is shown at the top of each subplot. The variance estimates in a zone fall to zero when the zone distance can be evenly divided by the sampling interval, i.e., the same distance estimate is obtained for each sub-sample at the specified sampling interval. Variance estimates peak between zero values when the remainder of the zone distance divided by the sample distance is not zero, i.e., each sub-sample estimates a different length for the zone distance.

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| Figure 16: Total distance of each zone at each site from half-meter to 10 meter sampling. Each line is a unique zone. Point size shows the variance across the replicates for each level of sampling effort. |

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| Figure 17: An example of the variance of the zone distances across sub-sample replicates for each zone at the Big Bend - TECO site from half-meter to 10 meter sampling. |

Detailed results for the zone lengths at each site are shown in Figures [18](#fig-zoneestbb), [19](#fig-zoneestcb), [20](#fig-zoneestfd), [21](#fig-zoneesthp), [22](#fig-zoneesthh), [23](#fig-zoneestlmr), [24](#fig-zoneestm), [25](#fig-zoneestutbp), and [26](#fig-zoneestwi). The shaded areas represent the true zones at half-meter sampling and the points show the estimates of the starting location for each zone at the specified sampling interval. The horizontal bars show the variance across the sub-samples for each level of sampling effort. The figures clearly show a reduction in precision for the zone lengths and an inability to identify some zones (overlap of estimates) with decreasing sample effort.

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| Figure 18: Estimates and variance of the estimates in the zone starting locations at Big Bend - Teco for 1 meter to 10 meter sampling. The colored regions indicate the zone delineations at half-meter sampling. |

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| Figure 19: Estimates and variance of the estimates in the zone starting locations at Cockroach Bay for 1 meter to 10 meter sampling. The colored regions indicate the zone delineations at half-meter sampling. |

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| Figure 20: Estimates and variance of the estimates in the zone starting locations at Fort DeSoto for 1 meter to 10 meter sampling. The colored regions indicate the zone delineations at half-meter sampling. |

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| Figure 21: Estimates and variance of the estimates in the zone starting locations at Harbor Palms for 1 meter to 10 meter sampling. The colored regions indicate the zone delineations at half-meter sampling. |

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| Figure 22: Estimates and variance of the estimates in the zone starting locations at Hidden Harbor for 1 meter to 10 meter sampling. The colored regions indicate the zone delineations at half-meter sampling. |

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| Figure 23: Estimates and variance of the estimates in the zone starting locations at LIttle Manatee River for 1 meter to 10 meter sampling. The colored regions indicate the zone delineations at half-meter sampling. |

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| Figure 24: Estimates and variance of the estimates in the zone starting locations at Mosaic for 1 meter to 10 meter sampling. The colored regions indicate the zone delineations at half-meter sampling. |

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| Figure 25: Estimates and variance of the estimates in the zone starting locations at Upper Tampa Bay Park for 1 meter to 10 meter sampling. The colored regions indicate the zone delineations at half-meter sampling. |

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| Figure 26: Estimates and variance of the estimates in the zone starting locations at Weedon Island for 1 meter to 10 meter sampling. The colored regions indicate the zone delineations at half-meter sampling. |

## 4 Conclusions and Recommendations

An assessment of the relative sampling effort required to obtain a representative sample can inform the utility and feasibility of a long-term monitoring program. A tradeoff exists between detail and effort, where an optimal level exists between too much and too little sampling. Highly intensive surveys may not provide novel information relative to the level of effort, compared to less intensive surveys that are efficient but may not provide an accurate sample of a population. Because the CCHA is expected to continue for several decades, identifying an optimal level of effort that provides sufficient information while minimizing time and resources collecting the data is critical to longevity of the program. This report provided a quantitative assessment of an optimal level of effort for sampling the vegetation community at each of nine monitoring sites. Results from this report can be used to justify amended sampling designs for future surveys.

Based on the results herein, sampling the vegetation community every meter along each transect is recommended. This level of effort is a 50% reduction in sampling from the original half meter sampling used during the first two phases of CCHA surveys. This recommendation is expected to dramatically improve overall sampling efficiency given that the vegetation transects are the most time intensive component of all CCHA sampling. All of the key metrics used to characterize the vegetation community and vegetation zones did not change dramatically from half-meter to 1 meter sampling. Although richness estimates declined with decreased sampling effort, large changes at all sites were not observed at 1 meter sampling. Species likely to be missed by reduced sampling are those with low frequency occurrence (Miller and Ambrose, 2000; Zhang et al., 2019), especially within each unique vegetation zone. However, identifying rare species is not a goal of the CCHA and a general assessment of vegetation communities in emergent tidal wetlands will not be compromised at 1 meter sampling.

The estimated elevation at which mangrove species are observed did not show consistent patterns across sites by species, although a general decrease was observed with reduced effort. This result was unexpected and it is unclear why reduced effort resulted in lower elevation estimates. Elevation generally increases along a transect and the sub-sampling method does not consistently sample lower elevations. An additional notable result was differences among the species for the elevations at half-meter sampling across the sites. In general, the three mangrove species are expected to follow an elevation gradient where red mangroves are more tolerant of polyhaline conditions (18-30 ppt) at lower elevations closer to the shoreline, white mangroves are intermediate, and black mangroves prefer oligohaline conditions (5-18 ppt) at higher elevations (Odum and McIvor, 1990). Some sites showed red mangroves at higher elevations than black mangroves, which was not expected, although these differences could be related to site-specific characteristics of the elevation gradient and porewater salinities. Regardless, the elevation metrics showed considerable changes with relative sampling effort, although they were very minor with a 50% reduction in effort at 1 meter sampling. Any changes as a function of sample effort will also be notably less for mangrove species with high frequency occurrence at a site (Figures [13](#fig-foperelevex) and [14](#fig-fovarelevex)).

Tracking changes in vegetation zones and their relative sizes is an additional component of CCHA sampling that is expected to shift with sea-level rise and temperature changes. Zone identification at each site is not affected by sample effort, so long as the sample interval is less than the length of the smallest zone at a site. Precision of the distance estimates for each zone decreases with reductions in sample effort, but the decrease is not linear and is affected by the actual zone length and sample interval. These issues are inconsequential for 1 meter sampling. However, zones are currently identified in the field by visual assessment, with markers placed at approximate transitions between zones. The desktop analysis provided herein assumed a naive process for zone identification that is not verified in the field. The results above are less critical if information on zones is based on field verification independent of the vegetation surveys. Zone distances and transitions reported by field crews should be used independently of distances based on meter marks from the vegetation transect. Further, it is anticipated that zone markers placed in the field will be reassessed each survey and moved appropriately to track potential changes. This information should be used as the basis of tracking zone changes related to climate change.

Finally, additional sampling methods included in the CCHA could be changed in the future based on identified deficiencies or additional sampling optimization required to maintain long-term monitoring. For example, the PCQ method has been identified as insufficient to track changes in tree communities. The original method described by Cottam and Curtis (1956) was developed to sample many trees (>90) in a homogeneous forest, with an assumption that trees are randomly distributed. This assumption is not true for the gradients and discrete zones that occur along the CCHA transects. Futrher, only twelve or less trees are sampled per zone, contributing to high sampling error and biased estimates of tree density and basal area. Changes to the tree sampling design have been proposed for future surveys where a sufficient number of trees are sampled within specified meter marks on either side of the transect. These changes will provide more accurate assessment and an ability to track changes over time. Any additional proposed changes to the CCHA methods should be supported through quantitative analyses and vetted through appropriate advisory committees (e..g, the TBEP Technical Advisory Committee).

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