

Patel College has an exploratory partnership with the Cuban government focusing on marine science research. The first collaboration is under way in another type of maritime race: the Tour de Turtles that began Monday.

The program tracks movements of more than a dozen migrating sea turtles. Whichever makes it the farthest at the end of 90 days is the winner.

Over the weekend, Patel College also co-sponsored the St. Petersburg visit of Alejandro Padrón, Cuba's consul general from its embassy in Washington, D.C., and his second in command, Armando Bencomo.

While the big news of the delegation's visit was interest in St. Petersburg for a consulate, the visitors also met with Patel College to discuss a relationship with the University of Havana and possibly other Cuban educational institutions.

It was during those meetings they talked about entering a student team in the St. Petersburg-Havana Race.

"This is about coming together to address common marine life issues," said David Randle, a professor with the Patel College. "We hope to make an impact."

Both the yacht race and the USF partnership are signs of an evolving relationship with Cuba.

The first race in 1930 featured 11 boats and was meant to be a promotional event to help St. Petersburg recover from the Great Depression.

It grew to include more than 30 boats a year and succeeded in bringing international acclaim to the city.

But the contest was canceled after the rise of Cold War-era communism in Cuba.

From the late 1990s through the early 2000s, another race known as the Havana Cup was run from St. Petersburg to Havana and drew more than 200 vessels each year. But that was canceled when the U.S. government refused to license any contests that included Cuba.

Then in 2015, the United States began licensing American boats to sail into Cuban water again.

Since then, Key West, Sarasota and Miami each have hosted boat races to Havana.

"With relations better and the race beginning, it feels like everything has come full circle," Winning said.

USF was once banned from any collaborations involving Cuba because of Florida statutes forbidding state money from being used to interact with a nation lacking diplomatic relations with the United States or that was designated a sponsor of terrorism by the State Department.

Cuba used to fall under both categories. Today, neither applies, allowing the university to engage in educational partnerships with the communist nation and join the yacht race.

Dan Whittle, who directs the New York-based Environmental Defense Fund's marine and coastal conservation projects in Cuba, said the maritime partnerships are a perfect way to begin this new engagement.

"Sharks, turtles, fish and other marine life move freely across borders," he said. "Marine science has shown clearly that the body of water between the U.S. and Cuba is what connects us, not divides us."

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St. Petersburg Yacht Club revives its once-annual regatta to Cuba 08/01/16
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