

A Brief History and Reasons for the Natural Areas Program in Palm Beach County
By Richard Moyroud for presentation to the PBC Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society
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Native Plant Societies across the country encourage planting native plants appropriate to the region as the best choice for landscaping, but these gardens rarely approach the diversity and complexity of natural areas. This FNPS chapter was a leader in the hard work that led to the long-term protection and management of more than 31,000 acres of original ecosystems, from beaches to forests and wetlands. The great success of this program led to many awards and it is probably the best in the country. Take time to visit these gems of reality; these are the absolute best "native landscapes" we can observe, and illustrate plant associations which are models for ornamental landscaping and restoration.

In the first half of the 20th century in Florida, clearing, draining, and mining removed most of the natural plant communities where the largest cities are now located. As with the rest of the American continent, the common idea was that natural resources were "endless."

1970s. The Local Audubon Society (probably the only environmental group in FL at the time) purchased and planted native plants at the Palm Beach County's John Prince Park along a "nature trail": it was understood that resident and migratory birds need native plants for food and nectar!

1980. The Florida Native Plant Society is founded in a meeting at Rollins College. Chapters will be established throughout Florida.

1981. Palm Beach County Chapter of FNPS is organized, meeting at Pine Jog Environmental Education Center, led by Sally Channon, Sarah Davis, and Dr. Dan Austin through Pine Jog and FAU.

1984. Coalition for Wilderness Islands arises from local Audubon societies, led by Dr. Grace Iverson, Dr. Fred Cichocki, Helen Hartley, Stella Rossi, meeting at home of Stella & Ric Rossi, included all local environmental groups and many political groups. The reality is that the few natural areas remaining are surrounded by development, creating "islands" in a sea of cultivated land, roads, and buildings.

1985. Exotic Pest Plants have expanded for decades throughout wild areas and landscapes, causing harm to natural areas and expensive control for utilities. The first Exotic Pest Plant Council is formed by academics (Dr. Dan Austin), Federal and State land managers (Everglades Nat. Park, Loxahatchee Refuge, State parks, water management districts), and the private sector (FPL and other utilities.)

1986. Request from the Coalition for Wilderness Islands to Palm Beach County Commission for study of remaining natural areas in PBC. Grant approved under Parks & Recreation Department, work done by Drs. Grace Iverson and Dan Austin. Sites rated as "high quality" = A, medium, B. Sites chosen show minimal disturbance to geology, ecology. A total of 38 sites are identified, and value of all sites is estimated at \$300 million!

Existing CARL program in Florida targets and purchases "Conservation and Recreation Lands"; CARL program approached, but offers no funds for any of our sites.

Oct 1987. Environmental Resources Management Department created for PBC, modeled after Dade county system. It is responsible for wellfields, wetlands, beaches, mosquito control, etc., and a better fit for natural areas management than Parks and Rec.

Oct. 1989. ERM hires staff designated for Natural Areas acquisition and management.

1990. Creation of “Environmentally Sensitive Lands Acquisition Selection Committee”; targets 14 best sites of 38 identified in Austin/Iverson report. List prepared for priority acquisition, even without committed funds from any source.

1990. The Nature Conservancy approached as a potential funding source, but cannot afford high price of land. TNC offers to send Eric Draper (now with DEP) to help train and organize concerned environmental organizations for a bond referendum. We agree that \$100M bond has realistic chance, not \$300M. Lands will be purchased from willing sellers.

Bond Language is carefully worded because it will control all future use of lands purchased.

Active preparation for \$100M bond to be presented in 1991 election: volunteers act as speakers, produce and distribute fliers, organize press events and presentations, speak at municipal and county meetings. Strong support comes from Commissioner Karen Marcus.

Joanne Davis, then president of the PBC chapter of FNPS and Chair of CELP (Citizens for Environmental Land Preservation), and past president Steve Farnsworth are active in site visits and strategy.

March 1991. Success, with 67% voting in favor of land preservation! The next step is to proceed in a methodical evaluation of sites and costs. Landowners line up to sell since there is cash available, and a real-estate downturn motivates sellers; TNC helps in negotiation for best price, discounts, tax credits, etc.; joint purchases with state “Preservation 2000”, CARL funds, and local municipalities; at the end of the allotted funding, \$100M has been leveraged to \$150M in acquisitions.

1992. First site purchased is Royal Palm Beach Pines, rescued from imminent development. Surrounding development later touts “nature preserve” as a highlight of their community.

1994. Natural Areas Management Advisory Committee (NAMAC) created to review management plans, suggest changes, and recommend approval; the committee continues to this day.

1990s and on. Palm Beach County’s Natural Areas Program receives many local and national awards

1999. \$150M parks, agriculture, conservation bond passes, provides additional \$50M for natural areas.

2000s. Natural Areas are recognized and appreciated by many, but some see the sites as “vacant land” which could accommodate playgrounds, schools, buildings, etc. Since this was anticipated, the strict bond language protects our sites. As with all public lands, including National Parks, there is no guarantee of protection in perpetuity, but many of our sites have multiple layers of ownership (city, county, state) so that all parties would have to agree to any change. Ongoing maintenance involves pest-plant control, prescribed fire, etc. Funding for maintenance needs a more stable income source. Volunteers are always welcome and can help in many ways. Please contact ERM for more details.

Unlike “landscapes”, natural areas need no irrigation, no fertilizer, do not need to be protected from freezing weather, and survive hurricanes with minimal damage. These sites are not raked, clipped, or “cleaned up”; fallen trees stay where they are (unless across a pathway) and decay, completing the cycle of life. Visit these site to see biological reality; protect these site from future impact as land becomes scarce. We need natural areas for a “sense of place” and our physical and mental well being,

Ballot Language

ISSUANCE OF BONDS FOR
PURCHASE OF ENVIRONMENTALLY SENSITIVE LANDS

"Shall Palm Beach County, in order to acquire, preserve and protect environmentally sensitive lands in Palm Beach County and protect wildlife and endangered species on such lands, issue general obligation bonds not exceeding \$100 million in principal amount with a maturity not exceeding twenty (20) years from the date of issuance and bearing interest at a rate not exceeding the legal rate, payable by ad valorem taxes?"

_____ Yes - For Bonds

_____ No - Against Bonds

THE PALM BEACH COUNTY NATURAL AREAS SYSTEM MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

The Palm Beach County Natural Areas System is comprised of those environmentally sensitive lands that are owned or leased by the County and managed as natural areas by the County.

“These natural areas were selected on the basis of their biological characteristics and were acquired to preserve the rare and diverse native ecosystems present on these sites and the endangered, threatened, and rare species of plants and animals that live there.”

Comprehensive Plan (cont.)

Policy 2.1-g: The County shall ensure that management plans are developed for County-owned or County-managed natural areas (Environmentally Sensitive Lands) and that the uses allowed on these lands are limited to those uses that are compatible with and preserve the natural character of the natural area (e.g., passive recreation, environmental education, scientific research).