

# FLORIDA NATURAL AREAS INVENTORY

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by Linda Duever

The Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) has developed a list of natural community types to be used in identifying and surveying Florida habitats and it is encouraging others to adopt this classification so that it will become standard statewide.

A significant feature of this new system is that the natural communities are distinguished on the basis of environmental differences (soils, hydroperiods, physiographic setting etc.) rather than by vegetation. FNAI is now preparing the first draft of a supplementary plant community classification for use in managing information about the vegetation types that grow within each of these environments. (This will actually be an

ongoing effort, with plant communities constantly being added as "new" species associations are confirmed through literature searches and field work.)

Hence the *natural community* refers to the kind of place suitable for a certain set of vegetation types, and the *plant community* represents the range of successional stages and variations which might occur on that type of site. The practical value of this dual system is that the natural community level can be used to roughly differentiate and inventory habitats where conservation demands information now but existing data is limited, while the plant community level provides a mechanism for organizing more detailed botanical information as it becomes available.

Because this classification system

represents a statewide synthesis of many regional ecosystem categorizations, and local terminology differs considerably from one part of the state to another, FNAI has prepared precise capsule definitions for each natural community. These definitions, which are available from FNAI, The Nature Conservancy, 254 East Sixth Avenue, Tallahassee, Florida 32303, specify physiographic, hydrological, and climatic characteristics and describe substrates, fire regimes, and typical vegetation.

Since ambiguous and inconsistent use of habitat terminology has been a major obstacle to the identification and preservation of Florida's endangered ecosystems, Florida Native Plant Society members should become familiar with these definitions

# NATURAL COMMUNITY CLASSIFICATION

and learn to use the community names correctly. Certainly, regional and disciplinary differences in the customary language will make some names seem awkward at first — and discerning field naturalists will immediately visualize a multitude of transitions and exceptions and be a bit bothered at the artificiality of cramming nature into such neat mental constructs. But, the advantages of having standard names and type localities for communities, as we do for species, should more than compensate for this discomfort. To make the sort of distinction between casual and precise usage we do when writing “magnolia” vs. “*Magnolia grandiflora*”, FNAI suggests capitalizing community names only when they are used strictly according to FNAI definitions and in

reference to a site where the community type has been confirmed by a reliable field survey.

To make it easier to understand, **The Palmetto** will present a series of articles describing groups of related natural communities and the associated plant communities. Scrub, Sandhill, and Xeric Hammock will be discussed in the next issue.

## GLOSSARY

hydroperiods:  
physiographic:  
hydrological:

substrates:

fire regimes:  
terrestrial:

the cycling of the wet periods

pertaining to physical geography

concerning the occurrence and circulation of the waters of the earth and atmosphere

the solid material upon which an organism lives or is attached

the frequency of occurrence of fire

pertaining to or growing on the land, not in water nor in air

**Terrestrial Communities:** Scrub, Sandhill, Xeric Hammock, Upland Pine Forest, Upland Mixed Forest, Upland Hardwood Forest, Slope Forest, Mesic Flatwoods, Scrubby Flatwoods, Pine Rockland, Rockland Hammock, Dry Prairie, Prairie Hammock, Sinkhole, Beach Dune, Coastal Strand, Maritime Hammock, Overwash Plain, Coastal Berm, Coastal Rock Barren, Shell Mound.