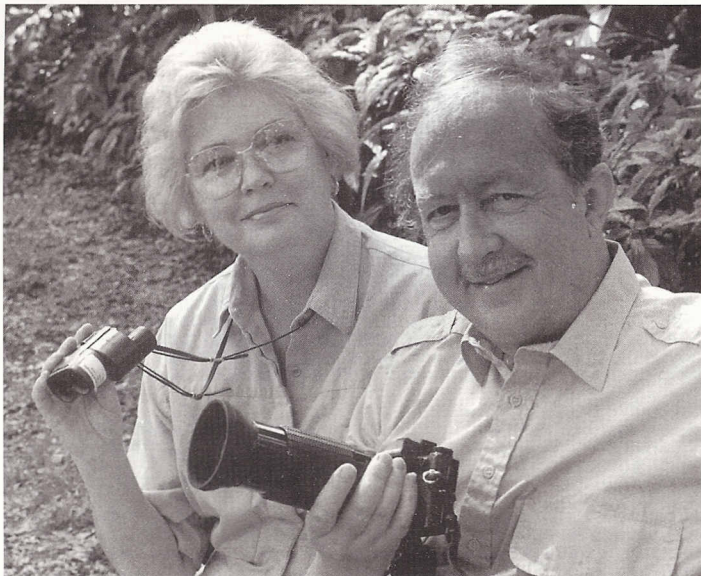


Bill Partington

Founder of FNPS

Personal statement

I am a semi-retired environmentalist who still gives courses for Elderhostel six or more weeks a year. I also lecture for groups on a number of natural history topics using such hopefully impressive titles as “Biodiversity” (for that I can use almost any of my thousands of disorganized slides) or “Common Florida Natural Areas,” using our handsome brochure created by Jeff Parker with photos by Jim Valentine. I’ve photographed wildlife in Kenya, India, Trinidad, Costa Rica, Galapagos Islands, Amazon, Puerto Rico, and especially



Bill Partington (with wife, Joan, deceased 1994)

in my grossly overgrown backyard, where I try to shoot all sorts of unpopular invertebrates on native plants, and make them look exciting.

I've lived in Florida since 1965, and since 1967, in Winter Park, where increasing numbers of rich-and-famous conservatives reside, whereas I represent the token poor-and-unknown liberal. My favorite organization is the awesome Florida League Against Progress (FLAP), which feels that putting truth in advertising will help turn the tide on Florida's maddening overpopularity. So we talk about sinkholes, hurricanes, chiggers, cockroaches, and other good things of which potential newcomers should be aware.

I started the Florida Native Plant Society in mid-1979, after trying vainly for years to get the Florida Audubon Society and garden clubs to do so. I was director of my low-budget, unendowed Florida Conservation Foundation (FCF) and had a secretary, Gen Pratt, who was active in the Florida Fish & Game Commission, so we called a dozen people, and I chaired a series of workshops at FCF. I designed a membership form that boasted all sorts of lofty goals to which nobody objected, so I distributed it through FCF's lists, and through boards on which I served, I obtained endorsements from other groups. In early 1980, I believe, I saw an article on plants in

Florida Audubon's *Naturalist* and asked the writer, Peggy Lantz, if she'd be interested in putting together the FNPS newsletter for which I'd collected articles, and she agreed to do the first one for free (the only price we could afford). Although we had fewer than 100 members, she suggested 1000 or so copies with membership forms, of course, which our steering committee of sorts and FCF distributed far and wide, with good results.

I also had contacts with native plant enthusiasts in Sanibel and these led to others in West Palm Beach, Miami, and beyond who agreed to form chapters of FNPS believing, I assume, that we had great substance and longevity.

I suggested a spring conference using my contacts at Rollins College (I also taught there as adjunct head of Environmental Studies, which then had no campus location so this was also sheltered at FCF's tiny office). Environmental Studies was a co-sponsor, a ploy FCF often used for its other various low-cost conferences and workshops featuring noted authorities. Dick Workman, Norma Jean Byrd, and I lined up speakers and suddenly, within a year, FNPS was off and running. Later annual conferences were at the University of Florida's Reitz Union where I knew the administrator so we got that free, the Conservancy in Naples, West Palm Beach, and Florida Atlantic University, using more local workers as enthusiasm spread, all at no charge, as I remember it.

FNPS never had any start-up funds, so I continued to use my scarce FCF funds to cover overhead and costs, and the FCF board seemed to think I knew what I was doing – if I wanted to risk further my own “security” in something I had faith in, it was okay with them. After a couple of years, FNPS started to build a small treasury and was fast becoming the tail that wagged the dog at FCF, with phone calls and mailings, requests for contacts and information, tax reporting, organizing activities, space, time, and administration. We were also publishing booklets and selling them. So FCF began charging FNPS for some of this, \$100 or so per month and going up as things became busier. We had a growing financial surplus due to our frugality and enthusiastic volunteers. I never took any payment from FNPS.

After five years, some on the FNPS board suspected I was fleecing FNPS and voted to drop FCF and hire a professional management agency, so I turned over about \$7,000 we had accumulated, a rather nice sum back then. Later I heard from the treasurer that this

had not been the best move, as the yuppy “pros” had no knowledge of native plants and FNPS funds sank. FNPS also had about 1500 members and 15 chapters of varying vitality when it left FCF. I lost interest and among other things went on to organizing FCF wildlife tours in the Southeastern U.S. and Costa Rica with my wife, Joan, until she died in 1994.

Probably the biggest disappointment I have in FNPS is its timidity and lack of aggressive action in saving native areas from public and private construction. I moved to Florida knowing it was already being greedily overdeveloped, but when you flew over the state, it still was green with islands of communities. Now, of course, it’s a sea of sprawled future slums with islands of green, much of which are fragmented ecosystems that are often planted or highly managed.

My original vision was to create a society that would use experts aggressively to take whatever actions are needed to protect native areas. Groups such as Audubon, Nature Conservancy, National (and Florida) Wildlife Federation, Sierra Club, and so on pursue environmental protection through various means with emphasis on certain aspects but none specializes in native plants, which obviously have great appeal – but the interest is not being effectively utilized.

The FNPS board, when it was separating from FCF, was dominated by some growers who were convinced the way to go was never to offend developers, presumably because they were potential customers. (Not all growers or consultants are so intimidated.) A major activity was to “rescue” plants and I have always been concerned that even apparently complete restoration omits some original species and is a second-best solution. I think a plant rescue, unfortunately, can make the developer look good and gives him an out for not setting aside significant natural lands. It’s better than nothing, but should not be FNPS’ front line.

I have never been timid about confronting persons or groups that damage the environment and often we won at least partial victories – sometimes complete victories and, of course, some complete failures. But I believe in standing up vigorously for what you believe in and never in creating an organization with a compromising position or defeatist attitude. You can beat city hall, and maybe even Donald Trump and Wal-Mart, if you try.