

Manatee Park Habitats Project: a Dream Becomes Reality

by JoAnne Trebatoski, Roger Clark, Kim Trebatoski, and Rick Joyce (past president, FNPS)

Photo by JoAnne Trebatoski



A pine flatwoods in the making. This is just one of many native habitats planted at Manatee Park.

In November 1996, a unique new park opened on sixteen acres of land along State Road 80 in eastern Lee County. Lee County arranged a long-term lease for the site from Florida Power and Light (FP&L) to develop a public park. The park is named Manatee Park because it abuts FP&L's power generation plant's warm-water discharge canal, a place that manatees use as a refuge during the winter months. The park provides viewing areas so that the public can see these gentle giants in the wild. Manatee Park already attracts 75,000 visitors each year, with many more predicted in future years. People from all over the country and the world come to see the manatees.

When the park was first established, much of the site was dominated by invasive exotic plants. Lee County Parks employees and private contractors removed Brazilian pepper (*Schinus terebinthifolius*), air potato (*Dioscorea bulbifera*), lead tree (*Leucaena leucocephala*), *Malacha urens*, *Solanum diphyllum*, and torpedo grass (*Panicum repens*). When the exotic plant removal process was completed, the native vegetation left on the site included several large magnificent live oaks (*Quercus virginiana*), sabal palms (*Sabal palmetto*), red mangroves (*Rhizophora mangle*), white stoppers (*Eugenia axillaris*), Simpson stoppers (*Myrcianthes fragrans*), sweet bay magnolias (*Magnolia virginiana*), myrsine (*Myrsine guianensis*), leather ferns (*Acrostichum danaeifolium*), laurel oaks (*Quercus laurifolia*), and pond cypress (*Taxodium ascendens*).

However, most of the land was devoid of any vegetation and Lee County had little money available to landscape the park. It had been agreed that only native plants would be used to revegetate the site. As part of the park construction, some minimum landscaping was included. A landscape contractor installed native grasses, oaks, leather fern, cocoplum (*Chrysobalanus icaco*), Walter's viburnum (*Viburnum obovatum*), and sabal palms. Most of the native grasses subsequently died. Invasive, non-native herbaceous cover such as torpedo grass had taken over, out-competing the native grasses.

Fred and JoAnne Trebatoski of the Coccoloba Chapter of FNPS were volunteer naturalists at Manatee Park and noticed the need for landscaping. JoAnne also happens to be the President of the Coccoloba Chapter and Fred is the Chapter Director. Fred and JoAnne took their concerns to the chapter and members were convinced to undertake a native habitat creation project.

In the winter of 1996, the Coccoloba Chapter approached Roger Clark, a Lee County Division of Public Parks and Recreation Services biologist, with their idea.

Clark said it was his dream to create several native plant communities at Manatee Park so that it might be used as a site for training professional landscapers as well as homeowners on how to identify, install, care for, and appreciate native plants. The Coccoloba Chapter and Lee County Parks realized that they shared a dream. A cooperative effort was agreed

upon to work toward making this dream become a reality. What happened after that was an incredible web of cooperation, donation, and hard work.

The Coccoloba Chapter members agreed that for the next three years (1997, 1998, and 1999), most of the money earned from fundraising (primarily the annual native plant sale) would go into creating and restoring plant communities at Manatee Park. Thus began an exciting community adventure that took on a life of its own. JoAnne and her daughter, Kim Trebatoski, joined with Roger Clark to design a master plan for the appropriate layout of native plant communities for the site.

In the spring of 1997, forested and herbaceous wetland communities were established within the surface water management system of the site when 34 volunteers from the Coccoloba Chapter, Lee County Parks, and citizens who just wanted to help got together on a Saturday morning. They planted sweet bay, bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*), pop ash (*Fraxinus caroliniana*), American elm (*Ulmus americana* var. *floridana*), pond apple (*Annona glabra*), red maple (*Acer rubrum*),

leather fern, spider lily (*Hymenocallis latifolia*), golden canna (*Canna flaccida*), duck potato (*Sagittaria* sp.), and blue flag iris (*Iris hexagona*). It had rained hard the night before so many people were standing knee deep in water as they planted, but not a complaint was heard.

As the wetland planting was being dug in, other volunteers were digging in forty South Florida slash pines (*Pinus elliottii* var. *densa*) to start a pine flatwoods area. The pines were donated by Terry Sanders of TJ's Nursery in Buckingham. Additionally, an understory planting was established beneath some oaks and sabal palms in an area that had been preserved when the exotics were being cleared. Wild coffee (*Psychotria nervosa*), Simpson stopper (*Myrci-anthes fragrans*), necklace pod (*Sophora tomentosa*), dahoon holly (*Ilex cassine*), Walter's viburnum, and coral bean (*Erythrina herbacea*) were planted. In the parking lot, a southern red cedar (*Juniperus silicicola*), donated by Rick Joyce, was planted due to the tree's high tolerance of alkaline (limerock fill) soils typical of parking lots.

The areas were watered and mulched. A watering truck and the mulch were provided by Lee County as were refreshments for the workers. The work began at 8:00 a.m. and was finished just before noon. Everyone went away feeling a great sense of accomplishment and a few sore muscles.

Then, the momentum of the project really began to pick up. Private nurseries and other Lee County divisions were joining the cooperative effort. Terry Sanders of TJ's Nursery again called to donate 15-gallon loblolly bays (*Gordonia lasianthus*). At the same time, twenty 10-gallon slash pines and twenty 10-gallon laurel oaks were provided as part of abatement (mitigation) for a clearing violation in another part of the county. Lee County regulations allow some clearing-related violations to be abated offsite

at a public facility such as a roadway, park, or school. Rick Joyce recognized that Manatee Park was a great location. These mitigation trees were planted by county jail trustees under the supervision and assistance of Jim Green and Fred Trebatoski.

Coccoloba Chapter member Dick Workman (past president, FNPS) donated some unusual native plants and has conducted

Danforth of Dan's Nursery in Alva donated some of the plants. Wax myrtle (*Myrica cerifera*), dahoon holly, spider lily, red stopper (*Eugenia rhombea*), varnish leaf (*Dodonaea viscosa*), rouge plant (*Rivina humilis*), and sweet acacia (*Acacia farnesiana*) were planted and mulched by four chapter members.

During the winter of 1997-98, a bird and butterfly garden was created along the manatee

viewing platform. Saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*), hackberry (*Celtis laevigata*), red maple (*Acer rubrum*), loblolly bay, wild lime (*Zanthoxylum fagara*), cat claw (*Pithecellobium unguis-cati*), yellow elder (*Tecoma stans*), blue porterweed (*Stachytarpheta* sp.), necklace pod, firebush (*Hamelia patens*), Bahama cassia (*Cassia bahamensis*), Bahama wild coffee (*Psychotria ligustrifolia*), Christmas berry (*Lycium carolinianum*), climbing aster (*Aster carolinianus*), coral bean (*Erythrina herbacea*), Florida



Photo by JoAnne Trebatoski

Volunteers of all ages and experience levels pitched in to plant at Manatee Park.

wetland monitoring of the site for the park construction permits. A seventh grade student, Weston Davis, has assisted Dick in his biological work at the site. At Weston's

privet (*Forestiera segregata*), quailberry (*Crossopetalum illicifolium*), golden dewdrop (*Duranta repens*), *Aster elliottii*, dwarf goldenrod (*Solidago* sp.), Tampa verbena (*Verbena tampensis*), yellowtop (*Flaveria linearis*), coreopsis (*Coreopsis leavenworthii*), Florida petunia (*Ruellia caroliniensis*), passionvine (*Passiflora* sp.), pipevine (*Aristolochia* sp.), red salvia (*Salvia coccinea*), Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*), rough sunflower (*Helianthus hirsutus*), horsemint (*Monarda punctata*), scorpion's tail (*Heliotropium angiospermum*), false dragonhead (*Physostegia denticulata*), and coontie (*Zamia pumila*) were planted.

A non-native but documented as excellent monarch butterfly attractor and larval food source, scarlet milkweed (*Asclepias curassavica*), was added. These plants were purchased and planted by the Coccoloba Chapter. Also, Virginia Girardin, Alice and Phil Tribbey, JoAnne and Fred Trebatoski, and Gloria Vernay donated various butter-

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middle school, community service is a part of the educational experience. For other students at the school, Weston has become a spokesperson for native plant community restoration, as a result of his involvement with Manatee Park. This has been a welcome and rewarding aspect of native plant education.

In the fall of 1997, an area around the park's lagoon was landscaped by the Coccoloba Chapter. This time, Ruth

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fly plants and seedlings from their gardens. The Lee County Parks furnished pinestraw to mulch this large area.

In the winter of 1998, twenty-five volunteers from the Coccoloba Chapter, Lee County Parks, City of Sanibel, Extension Service Master Gardeners, and Lee County Land Stewards again spent a Saturday morning planting. This time it was to establish an understory in the pine flatwoods area. Dan and Debbie Perkins, of Perkin's Nursery in LaBelle, donated twenty-five 3-gallon and six 10-gallon saw palmettos. An additional fifty three-gallon saw palmettos were purchased by the Coccoloba Chapter. The following understory

plants were purchased by the chapter with matching funds from Lee County Parks: gallberry (*Ilex glabra*), locustberry (*Byrsonima lucida*), dwarf wax myrtle (*Myrica pusilla*), blueberry (*Vaccinium* sp.), Black-eyed Susans, blazing star (*Liatris* sp.), myrtle oak (*Quercus myrtifolia*), wiregrass (*Aristida beyrichiana*), and Florida paintbrush (*Carphephorus corymbosus*). Rob Loflin and Dan Clark from the City of Sanibel Natural Resources Department brought along a gasoline-powered auger to drill holes for the plants. With the auger, planting went much more quickly.

Many other native plantings have occurred at the park as well.

In the fall of 1996, thirty wetland plants were donated by the Coccoloba Chapter and planted by Lee County Parks. In the fall of 1997 and spring of 1998, Kim Trebatoski and her son, Dakota, conducted four plant rescues to remove native plants from a construction site, with the owners' permission, and replant these in the pine area of the park. Rescued plants included slash pine, tarflower (*Befaria racemosa*), coontie, pennyroyal (*Piloblephis rigida*), wiregrass, Florida paintbrush, and batchelor buttons (*Polygala rugelii*). In the fall of 1997, the Coccoloba Chapter donated beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*) and coontie to plant in the pine area. On Arbor Day

1998, a ten-foot live oak was donated by the Florida Division of Forestry and planted by an elementary school class that was visiting the park. In the spring of 1998, the Coccoloba Chapter donated additional wild coffee, beautyberry, golden dewdrop, coral honeysuckle, Walter's viburnum, dune sunflowers, and varnish leaf.


More good news continues. The Audubon Society of Southwest Florida donated \$500. to develop an educational brochure about the Manatee Park habitats. This project is presently in progress and is being jointly worked on by Lee County Parks and the Coccoloba Chapter. Additionally, John Kiseda, Environ-

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mental Educator with Lee County Parks, has had a water source installed for the butterfly garden to make watering of the plants easier to aid in the plants' survival. John is also having signage made to identify the various habitat areas. Next year, an oak hammock area will be started as well as an oak identification area. Also, understory plants will be added to the pine flatwoods.

Through the shared vision of Roger Clark and the Coccoloba Chapter, along with the cooperative efforts of Lee County Parks, the Coccoloba Chapter of FNPS, the Audubon Society of Southwest Florida, Lee County Division of Planning and Environmental Sciences Program, four private nurseries, Extension Service Master Gardeners, Lee County Land Stewardship Program, Florida Division of Forestry, and concerned citizens, the dream to have a Lee County park function as a premier environmental education site for learning about native plants is now a reality – and all of this in a two-year period of time! No one involved in the project envisioned this becoming a reality so quickly. But as the shared dream of a few people became the shared dream of many, the project gathered resources and enthusiasm.

Visitors to Manatee Park are already commenting on its beauty and inquiring about all the “new native plants.” It is our hope that this story will inspire others to dream and to work to preserve, restore, and create native plant habitats in their communities. Sharing talents, resources, and energy with many agencies and people creates a synergy that lifts one's spirits as well as accomplishes a shared dream in a short time. 

Manatee Park is located on State Road 80 (Exit 25), just east of I-75 in Lee County. The park is open daily from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Manatees frequent the park between November and March, during colder temperatures. Parking is \$.75 per hour or \$3.00 per day.