

History of the Endangered Plant Advisory Council

By Richard Moyroud (1994, updated 2014; ed. J. Rynear)

During the 20th century, certain plant groups such as orchids and bromeliads suffered the ravages of collectors and many early reports on the abundance of certain species seem almost impossible to believe. Old photographs of horse-drawn carts laden with tons of orchids prove these stories. Many other plant groups also continue to be targeted from removal from the wilds; in several cases collectors have extracted the last known plants, and those species are now presumed extinct in Florida. Florida's Endangered Plant Advisory Council (EPAC) was created in 1978 in response to public concern over the depletion and risk of extinction in the flora of Florida. Since its inception, the EPAC has served a critical need in providing the expertise to establish the current status of imperiled native species.

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Division of Plant Industry, maintains a list of regulated plants, including various categories of native plants. The authority of this action is granted by the "Preservation of Native Flora of Florida Act" in the Florida Statutes. The listed plants receive varying degrees of protection but primarily they come to light as plants in need of monitoring in the wild and regulation in commerce. The Council, which serves in an advisory capacity, makes evaluations based on the best available information and forwards recommendations to the Commissioner of Agriculture. The Council is comprised of seven members representing the following organizations: Florida Federation of Garden Clubs, Inc.; Florida Nurserymen and Growers Association; Committee for Rare and Endangered Plants and Animals; Florida Forestry Association; Florida University botanists (2 positions); and the Florida Native Plant Society. A non-voting member and secretary represents the Division of Plant Industry.

The Council meets once yearly in Gainesville at the Division of Plant Industry offices. There is no budget for meetings and members cover the cost of their own travel, lodging, and meals. The Council reviews the Regulated Plant List, evaluates candidate species for addition or deletion, and uses the combined expertise of its members to address issues pertaining to endangered plants in Florida, within the scope of its mission as defined under statute. All meetings are open to the public, and are often attended by professionals from other state or federal agencies and non-governmental groups. These participants include representatives from the Florida Natural Areas Inventory, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Florida Forest Service, and others in both public and private fields. It is a rare occasion to see such pooling of information on taxonomic questions, field reports and apparent trends in the status of our native plant species. All too often the conclusions are sobering and reflect the result of years of population depletion through habitat destruction.

It is always difficult to quantify the exact levels of endangerment, but the Council has adopted a ranking system designed by one of its members. This one-page form asks basic questions about numbers of populations, numbers of individuals, range by number of counties, number of protected sites, degree of direct threat, and other considerations, all with the goal of producing a number from 1.5 to 17. Each plant submitted for review is carefully analyzed by these criteria

and is ranked accordingly. A ranking of less than 8.5 justifies the status of “endangered”; 9 to 12 is “threatened”; higher numbers are not considered for protected status unless there are special pressures on particular species, such as those harvested commercially. The designation of “commercially exploited” is used for this last category and recognizes that over-harvesting of even the most abundant species can push it towards extinction (remember the Passenger pigeon).

Over a 20 period, the Council refined the list, teasing out common species that were grouped with rare species; initially, all ferns and all orchids were listed without species detail, common or not. This flaw was corrected as the Council dealt with each group, and the numbers of listed species is now much higher. As of the 2010 published list there are 440 endangered species, 117 threatened species, and 8 commercially exploited species. Additional work has sometimes shown that a species has more populations than originally known, and species have occasionally been downgraded. The changes produced by the yearly meetings require at least one year for acceptance prior to publication in the public record.

A funding program for research and conservation of listed species has been in place since 2000, and approximately \$250,000 is distributed yearly to qualified recipients (non-profit institutions with a proven record of research, propagation, conservation, and educational programs). These funds have helped in understanding the reproductive biology of rare species, surveys and management recommendations, educational materials, *in-situ* and *ex-situ* propagation work, and reintroduction when feasible.

Other states have only begun to compile lists of their threatened and endangered species, but the Florida model has worked quite well and can easily be adapted. We must thank Dr. Dan Ward and others who helped create the legislative language and worked to pass the law in 1978. The first meetings were in the early 1980s, and I attended as a member of the public. At that time, Susan Wallace was the Conservation Chair for the Florida Native Plant Society (FNPS), and was therefore our representative on the council. In 1992, I was appointed FNPS Conservation Chair and attended EPAC on behalf of FNPS. At my first EPAC meeting I was elected chair and have held that position to this day. Although I am no longer Conservation Chair for FNPS, I agreed to stay on as the designated FNPS representative, and will continue at the pleasure of the FNPS board.

- Richard Moyroud