



University of South Florida

Tampa, Florida

Habitat

SCHOOL

University of South Florida, public 4-year university

Total enrollment 47,000

Tampa, FL

ABSTRACT

We have preserved an area of approximately one square mile, comprising a variety of habitats including extensive wetlands (mostly cypress swamp) and the only large, intact piece of Florida sandhill habitat within 50 miles. Sandhills are open dry savanna-like habitats, usually with an open overstory of longleaf pine, which is maintained by fires occurring roughly every 5-10 years. Their understory typically includes an exceptionally diverse assemblage of herbaceous plants. Sandhill habitat is considered to be threatened and endangered both globally and in



Florida. An estimated 400 gopher tortoises – a species currently listed as of special concern in Florida and being studied for federal listing – inhabit this sandhill area. Eastern indigo snakes – a federally endangered species – occur in the ERA but are quite rare. At least 404 plant species are present in the area preserved, including 9 listed as endangered, threatened, or commercially exploited in Florida, and 4 known to occur nowhere else in Hillsborough County. The property includes an intact sequence of different soil profiles that occur along a topographic gradient – technically, a catena – including soils characteristic of sandhill, seepage slopes, pine flatwoods, and several types of wetlands. Expenditures (and savings of money) have been minimal. We expect that there are substantial impacts on GHG emissions and local water resources, and are currently in the process of estimating these impacts.

GOALS AND OUTCOMES

Goals

General goals are to preserve the habitat for conservation, research, and teaching. Our goals for the next 2-3 years are to (1) establish an Advisory Board; (2) find ways to resume our program of prescribed fire in the sandhill habitat; (3) secure an operating budget from the University to make those goals possible; (4) establish both a faculty director and a part-time land manager for the property; and (5) develop both an attractive web site and new signage.

Accomplishments and Outcomes

We have successfully preserved the habitat and have the University's full support to continue to do so.

Challenges and Responses

1. As this property is in an urban area, there is constant development pressure from the surrounding area. Most recently this has involved interest by the county in widening a neighboring road. The university has announced its opposition to this plan.
2. It has been difficult to maintain our prescribed fire program because of the tight restrictions imposed on fires in this urban area. By working towards obtaining an operating budget from the university, we are hoping to be able to contract this work out.
3. Initially it was difficult to convince the University of the importance of this project. However, the administration now recognizes – largely because of the number of classes taught, theses written, and research grants obtained, that this is a unique and important resource.

Campus Climate Action: Your School's Carbon Footprint

We are currently working to obtain estimates of the effect of the Ecological Research Area on USF's carbon footprint.

Commentary and Reflection

This effort began 30 years ago, with what was considered to be derelict property. As a result, it was not initially valued within the University; for example there were proposals to put riding trails and to build a Presidential home in the Ecological Research Area. However, the University administration was persuaded otherwise when we brought to their attention the high research and teaching value of this land. The project has never been provided with a budget by the University. However, because it is a large, wild area, faculty at USF have been able to make extensive use of it over the years, and a large number of research and teaching activities have taken place there. As a result, our administration now understands its importance and in recent years has been quite supportive of our efforts.

ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

Leaders and Supporters

A committee within the Department of Integrative Biology (and previously, the old Biology Department) has administered the Ecological Research Area. Drs. Henry Mushinsky and Earl McCoy have been members of this committee for 30 years. In the early years, Drs. Bruce Williamson and Dave Hartnett played important roles on this committee as well. In recent years, Dr. Gordon Fox has been a member of the committee.

Funding and Resources

The project has always operated on a shoestring, with no funding from the University. There have been, however, large in-kind donations (for example, in past years the University plowed fire lanes) and large donations of time by many graduate and undergraduate students.

Education and Community Outreach

The USF ERA is an important asset for the surrounding community and for the state of Florida. It is used by numerous public agencies, including Southwest Florida Water Management District, Hillsborough County Medical Examiner, University of Florida School of Forest Resources & Conservation, City of Tampa Parks & Recreation Department, Florida Public Archaeology Network, U.S. Geological Survey, Florida Fish & Wildlife Commission, Florida Natural Areas Inventory, and the Hillsborough County Mosquito & Aquatic Weed Control division. Because there is no staff on duty and there is a high density

of ongoing research and teaching activities, access is through arranged activities only. Some examples of this include bird counts conducted by the Tampa Audubon Society, sampling by the Florida Butterfly Monitoring Network, and public wildflower walks led by the USF Botanical Garden. It is also used extensively by students and faculty at the University of South Florida.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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MORE ABOUT YOUR SCHOOL

Campus Sustainability History

As with so many other schools, having our president sign the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment was a transformational act. Since the signing (in 2008), we have: incorporated sustainability into our university's strategic plan, convened a sustainability steering committee that prepared the university's first greenhouse gas inventory and climate action plan, established an Office of Sustainability, implemented a university-wide policy on institutional sustainability, launched the world's first School of Global Sustainability, erected the first eco-friendly (LEED Gold) building on our campus and, most recently, created a million-dollar Student Green Energy Fund to steer USF toward a carbon-free environment fueled by renewable energy. All of these initiatives helped us earn a STARS Gold rating from AASHE. Learn more at usf.edu/sustainability.

Image credit: Anne C. Schmidt