



Suwannee-St. Johns Group

Sierra Club

Newsletter

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Coastal Plain Ecosystem Collapse

BY SYDNEY T. BACCHUS, PH.D.

Alien beetles, deadly fungus, ecosystem collapse and groundwater alterations—what do they have in common? Come to the March 1 meeting for the intriguing details.

In January, a multiagency-sponsored working group met on Jekyll Island State Park for two days for presentations and discussions on the latest increment of coastal plain ecosystem collapse.

In 2002, Asian beetles identified as *Xyleborus glabratus* were trapped near the Savannah port. The beetles carry a symbiotic fungus lethal to red bay trees shortly after exposure. Later dead trees are “re-attacked” by the beetles for the purpose of laying eggs.

In native lands, the beetle attacks all members of the red bay, oak/beechn and wax myrtle families. Recent information suggests the beetles also have infected sassafras trees in red bay “die-off” areas. Sassafras and oaks are not restricted to the coastal plain. Oaks occur throughout the U.S.

The beetles have spread rapidly throughout Georgia’s barrier islands, coastal plain and into South Carolina and Florida. Tree death on state and federal “protected” lands in those three states has been severe.

Claims of beetle attacks on “healthy” trees are not supported by my investigations. All mapped tree “die-off” sites have been within areas designated as “cones of depression”—or aquifer drawdown areas—as early as the 1980s. All of the “red bay die-off” locations I’ve inspected also exhibit the typical characteristics of areas subjected to severe, chronic groundwater impacts, including premature decline and death of numerous other species of trees.

More specifically, the “die-off” sites I have inspected also coincide with areas of mining/excavation or of industrial groundwater withdrawals.

Environmental lands purchased by the St. Johns River Water Management District adjacent to mined areas in

North Florida have reportedly been infested with the beetles.

Those circumstances strongly suggest groundwater impacts play a key role in the attraction of beetles carrying the lethal fungus and causing the death of red bay, sassafras and potentially other species.

At the working group meeting, it was acknowledged that the logging industry routinely cuts and chips red bay trees when logging cypress wetlands, with the combined chips sold commercially as “cypress mulch.” Also confirmed was that these

chips, potentially including live beetles with the deadly fungus, are not treated to prevent additional contamination at transport destinations, such as confirmed presence in Indian River County. “Cypress mulch” from those types of sources routinely is shipped to Wal-Marts and similar corporations throughout the U.S., then is sold to the unsuspecting public.

Consequently, the logging of cypress, export, import and sale of chipped cypress and other native trees should be banned to prevent rapid spread of this problem

see BEETLE, page 7



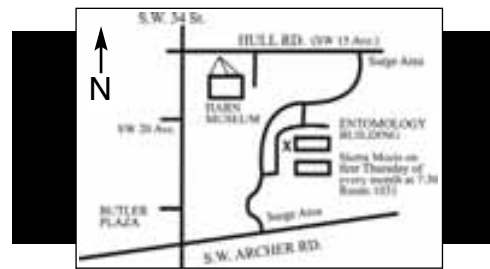
GENERAL MEETING

Thursday, Mar. 1, 7:30 PM

Entomology/Nematology Building on the UF campus
(Just east of the Performing Arts Center. Turn south off
Hull Road on to Natural Areas Road.)

**ASIAN BEETLES
AND ECOSYSTEM
COLLAPSE**

**SYDNEY BACCHUS
HYDROECOLOGIST**



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Home Depot Moves In

BY ROB BRINKMAN

My travels about Gainesville have taken me frequently past the site being cleared for a new Home Depot. It is difficult to watch the trees cleared even knowing that the area was once a golf driving range and had been previously altered from its natural state.

The site, known as the Hartman tract, after the family that formerly owned it, has been the subject of years of debate since Wal-Mart first proposed building a supercenter, additional housing and retail areas there. The site is known to be part of the headwaters of Hogtown Creek, Gainesville's largest creek.

Wal-Mart twice submitted petitions to rezone portions of the Hartman tract to allow a supercenter. By narrow margins and after protracted debate, the company's proposal failed.

Later Wal-Mart proposed trading the Hartman tract for Northside Park, so the company could then build its supercenter at that site and the city could have a park on the Hartman tract.

The Sierra Club and many others steadfastly argued that the site was too ecologically fragile for such intense development. That proposal went nowhere.

Many people were surprised that there

was no outcry when Home Depot proposed to build there. However, the portion of the Hartman tract that had been a golf driving range and was located closest to the intersection of US Highway 441 and Northwest 53rd Avenue has been zoned commercial for many years, thanks to a settlement agreement long before the recent developments were proposed. This is where Home Depot will put its store, and the company has a right to develop the property consistent with the provisions of the zoning classification.

Because of the community awareness resulting from the battles to stop the supercenter, the Alachua Conservation Trust worked with Gainesville Mayor Pegeen Hanrahan and others to secure a Florida Communities Trust grant to purchase the majority of the Hartman Tract from Home Depot. The most sensitive areas of the ecologically significant tract will be protected forever, hopefully.

Conservation of the entire Hartman tract would have been preferable, but that

CHAIR'S



CORNER

was not realistically going to happen because of the commercial zoning.

Seeing the trees cleared on this site has caused me to reflect on the philosophical division within the Sierra Club and throughout much of the environmental movement. Some people see compromise and negotiated settlements as evils to be avoided. Others see that we live in a political world and it is rare to prevail entirely on any issue. Conservationists have fewer resources than those who want to exploit natural resources; therefore we must pick our battles.

I believe it's necessary to engage in a dialogue and reach the best agreement possible that protects as much as possible. This would not be as difficult if we were clairvoyant. Often we must rationally consider the options and seek the best we believe can be achieved.

IMPACT FEES

In February, I was contacted by several reporters to discuss the proposed revision to the Alachua County impact fee ordinance. I was reminded of the stakeholder negotiations that I participated in several years ago. At the time, myself and others accepted a fee schedule with deep discounts from the actual costs of infrastructure needed to support new roads. We felt that it was better to get impact fees enacted and to try

see CORNER, page 6

Visit the National and Local Sierra Club Websites!

National: <http://www.sierraclub.org> • Local: <http://www.gatorsierra.org>

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Interested in hosting a newsletter folding party? Contact Scott Camil at 375-2563

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A Peek Into the Birder's World

BY KAREN GARREN

Sandhill Cranes go north in February. There are two populations of Sandhill Cranes in Florida—one consists of year-round residents and the other is migratory.

On winter mornings, the cranes wake in the fields where they have gathered in great flocks. As the earth warms, air currents rise, and at about 9 a.m., so do the birds.

Lifting and circling, higher, ever higher, they disappear into the sky until only their bellies glitter as they turn into the sun, their musical warbling carrying for miles.

One chilly overcast morning, while working in the reclaimed wetlands of Hamilton County phosphate mines, I heard cranes warbling. Way off in the distance were dozens, circling like a whirlpool. More came in, more than I could count, hundreds climbing to great heights, spiraling higher to catch the currents then turning north towards Kansas, the Dakotas, and the winding wetlands of the Platte River. From all directions they came, great congregations lasting for hours. How many years had this ritual been performed? How does wetland destruction and reclamation affect it?

For the past several years the Florida Wildlife Commission has been reintroducing the giant white Whooping Crane, hunted to extinction here during the 1920s. It's a laborious process. The birds are hatched from penned parents at the Crane Refuge in Wisconsin, fed by puppets and costumed handlers to prevent imprinting on humans.

Reared with Sandhill Cranes, young

Whoopers had to learn to spend nighttime nesting in water to keep from succumbing to bobcats and other predators. Trained to fly behind ultra-lights, they were shown migration routes from northern lands to Florida.

Successes came slowly, but a mated pair successfully reared a chick last year and reports of Whoopers come more frequently. Last January a pair was seen among the great flocks of Sandhill Cranes on Paynes Prairie.

A friend and I hiked the LaChua trail to the overlook tower. No Whooper sightings, but lovely weather, hundreds of alligators, bird diversity and numbers reminiscent of the Everglades in the 60s, and an extremely cooperative beautiful American Bittern made for a memorable day.

Then the Feb. 2 storm struck. A trailer park in Lady Lake was laid to waste, 20 people were killed, and dozens were left homeless. Of the new flock of Whooping Cranes recently flown in from Wisconsin, kept penned near Crystal River, 17 of 18 were drowned or electrocuted. Devastating.

But the program continues. In the future, always scan flocks of Sandhill Cranes to spot their regal cousin.

OUTINGS

MARCH 10—Family outing to track the wild and tend the domestic animals at Morningside Nature Center, 9 to noon. We'll start with a visit to the 1890's farm to

feed the animals then do some amateur tracking with naturalist Kristina Jackson. Morningside is a terrific piece of land with a wide assortment of wildlife including foxes, deer, gopher tortoise, and much more. A Florida animal tracks activity will be provided.

MARCH 17—Attention all Marion County residents. Here's an outing opportunity in your neck of the woods. To high-light potential impacts of a proposed mega-development near Dunellen, the Sierra

Club is hosting a Potluck Picnic and Paddle up Rainbow River.

If you've not visited before, Rainbow Springs was a tourist attraction in the 60s. It became a state park, and

the invasive exotics are slowly being weeded out. The grounds at the front entrance are in beautiful native plant landscaping.

Rainbow runs into the Withlacoochee River, one time slated for the western leg of the Cross Florida Barge Canal. Rainbow is short and scenic with the state park lands to the east and million dollar homes on the west.

For the paddle, your own canoe is convenient but arrangements to borrow may be made. Call 352-468-1790 or email knoxberries@msn.com for more information.

MARCH 24—Water Festival at Fanning Springs, a lovely state park on the Suwannee River. Sierra Club will be tabling. Come join us and have a good time.



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Florida Forever...and Ever?

BY KATHY CANTWELL

Public Lands Issue Chair

An coalition of conservation and environmental groups hosted Florida Forever Day last month in Tallahassee to let legislators know that the citizens of Florida support the largest land-buying program in the country.

Florida Forever Day was February 6. I joined Willy the Losen from the Putnam Land Conservancy, Karen Ahlers from the Putnam Environmental Council, Jill McGuire from the Santa Fe Lake Dwellers, Lauren Day from the Alachua Conservation Trust, and David Auth, biodiversity chair for the Florida Sierra Club.

The event was sponsored by the Florida Forever Coalition, an alliance of 16 state and national conservation and environmental groups. A rally and lunch was held in the plaza of the capitol building, so lawmakers could hear the support for expanding and renewing Florida Forever.

Ironically, Florida Forever is funded by development. Whenever a deed is recorded, a documentary stamp charge—based on the purchase price—is added to the recording fees. Some of the money from those “doc stamps” go into the Florida Forever fund. The legislature determines how much can be used each year for the Florida Forever program.

For the past 15 years, that amount has not changed, raising \$300 million a year. But we all know what has happened to the price of land. As a result, the Florida Forever program has been able to buy less

and less land at a time when the state is experiencing its most rapid growth.

Currently, there are 95 parcels of land (around 2 million acres) that have made it through the rigorous state ranking system and been determined to be of great ecological value on the Florida Forever list. They will probably not be purchased by the state and will instead be developed unless we do something about it. Even more land has yet to be evaluated.

We need to let legislators know that Florida Forever funding needs to be doubled this year and next. This will cause the present legislated fund to sunset within two years.

We then need to have legislation that will fund another state land buying program. The coalition believes that \$1 billion dollars a year needs to be spent on preserving our lands for future generations, if we are to get the job done.

On Florida Forever Day, the group from our area divided into groups and were able to meet with state representatives Chuck Chestnut and Joe Pickens, who were sympathetic to our request.

Lawmakers need to hear from others though as they hear requests for funds from all types of groups.

Take a minute to send an e-mail, write a letter or make a phone call. Some impor-

tant talking points are:

- In 1998, the state resolution to increase funding for Florida Forever got more votes than any other ballot initiative, showing the voters understand the importance of our state land-buying program
- The amount to purchase these lands



has not increased since 1990 when the average price of land was \$3800 an acre. It is now \$29,300 an acre.

If we have learned any lesson from the Everglades restoration process it is that it is far cheaper to preserve important ecosystems than to have to restore them.

We need to increase funding to Florida Forever to \$600 million this year.

We need to start now with forming new legislation that will continue a land-buying program once the present program sunsets.

To find out how to contact your legislators go to www.myfloridahouse.gov or www.flstate.gov.

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Galápagos Islands Face Many Threats

BY ADAM HAYASHI

The Galápagos Islands have long been a source of fascination. Every year more than 60,000 people visit these enchanted islands and another 30,000 people call the islands their home. These islands are also home to many indigenous species found nowhere else in the world, and it is this ever-growing human population that may threaten their very existence.

The volcanic island chain, which sits about 600 miles west of Ecuador, was first discovered by Europeans when Dominican Fray Tomás de Berlanga's boat drifted off course in 1535. Three hundred years later, the islands proved to be the inspiration for Charles Darwin's historic publication, *The Origin of Species*.

Today, however, introduced species, commercial fishing, oil spills and ecotourism threaten the islands' fragile ecosystem. Feral goats, pigs, dogs, cats, rats, and many other species have altered the ecosystem characteristics and driven endemic species, such as several species of the Galápagos tortoise, to extinction. Lonesome George, a geochelone elephantopus abingdoni found 30 years ago on Pinta Island, is the last of his kind.

The islands get their name from *galápagos*, which means the saddle from the shells of saddle-backed Galápagos tortoises. These tortoises were prized by pirates and whalers as a fresh source of meat. Whalers traditionally used the islands as a hunting ground and set up base

camp where they would hunt local fur seals for added income. As a result by the 1900s, the Galápagos fur seal was nearly extinct.

Today over fishing is endangering the sea cucumber and spiny lobster populations. It wasn't until 1934 that legislation was passed to protect the Galápagos fauna. That did not stop the United States from building an air base on the island of Baltra, nearly wiping out the iguana population there. Today there are even hotels on Santa Cruz and San Cristóbal. Tourism drags in an estimated \$120 million dollars annually.

Many fear the impact humans are having on the environment. In 2001, the tanker Jessica ran aground near San Cristóbal dumping nearly 240,000 gallons of petroleum products into the sea. Nearly 15,000 marine iguanas, or roughly 62 percent of the population on Santa Fe Island, died within a year. At this rate and with man's intervention, the Galápagos Islands that Darwin knew and wrote about will not be around for long.

To find out more about the Galápagos Islands and to visit them for yourself, contact Adam Hayashi at hayashia@cf.edu and ask about the course entitled Darwin, Evolution, and the Galápagos Islands being offered at CFCC in Ocala this summer. Don't forget to inquire about the 10-day trip to the Galápagos Islands. You can also call 352-854-2322, ext. 1459 for more information.



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and make the fees more accurately reflect the true cost of development when it was time to revisit the fee schedule.

Well that time has come, and many people are suffering from sticker shock with respect to the transportation impact fee. Over the last four years, the cost to build roads has nearly quadrupled. In December, the cost to build one lane mile of road was estimated at \$5 million, but the latest cost estimate is approaching \$7 million.

With costs rising this fast, thanks a hot real estate market as well as rising energy and raw material costs, there is an increasing danger in discounting impact fees. Once the fees have been collected, the county is obligated to build the infrastructure needed to increase road capacity. Yet, if inflation and discounts leave insufficient funding, the taxpayers will end up paying much of the actual cost of construction. Now that the fees have been implemented, they need to recover the full cost, with no discounts.

GLOBAL WARMING

I must admit to a nagging fear that many efforts may be little more than rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. One of the top priorities for the Sierra Club is stopping the coal rush. In Florida there are at least six coal power plants proposed. The largest of these, the Glades power plant in South Florida, will generate two gigawatts of electrical power, and release

about 180 pounds of mercury a year.

There are already numerous fish consumption advisories throughout Florida because of mercury contamination. How can we continue to emit more? How do we stop these plants when current state and federal regulations allow such pollution levels?

Existing weak regulations motivated me to tell our local attorney handling the



The Hartman tract, at US Highway 441 and Northwest 53rd Ave., soon to be a Home Depot. The site was once proposed as a Wal-Mart Supercenter.

Seminole Power plant case in Palatka to agree to their request to discuss a potential settlement. The resulting settlement had some significant positive aspects, such as \$200,000 worth of energy saving compact fluorescent light bulbs and a limit of 118 pounds a year of mercury for a site that will also generate two gigawatts of power.

Still, more than a hundred pounds of mercury will have significant health impacts on both human and animal populations. Could we have done better? Should we have refused to settle and gambled on stopping the plant entirely?

It is difficult to agree to settle when you believe that it is a tremendous mistake to build any new coal plants. The hope is for less damage and more energy savings in the future which may prevent some of the pollution from these plants. Settling with Seminole will leave more resources to fight other proposed coal plants, such as the one in Taylor County. Absent certain knowledge of the future we can only use our best

judgment and hope for the best outcomes.

Environmentalists may disagree at times about what the most prudent decision is. We should all recognize, however, that we all want similar end results and should not criticize people for holding a different view.

I am speaking specifically of attacking some people as not being green enough or true conservationists, not of legitimate constructive debate about a given issue. Vigorous debate of strategy and tactics is healthy and productive and helps

strengthen the environmental movement. However, personal criticism of others simply because they do not agree is simply immature behavior.

As one who is willing to engage in dialogue and seek some degree of consensus, I realize that those who are unwilling to yield are an asset. Their resolve helps to keep the framework of a discussion focused on what the stakes are and how important these matters are to our future. While we may not always agree on the specifics of an issue, we should respect others for their sincere efforts to protect our planet.

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SSJ EXCOM ENDORSES HANRAHAN AND LOWE

Gainesville voters will go to the polls on March 6. Mayor Pegeen Hanrahan and Commissioner Crair Lowe are running for re-election. By a vote of 12-0 (with three members absent), the SSJ Sierra Club Executive Committee voted to endorse Hanrahan and Lowe.

Turnout is likely to be abysmal, which means your vote is even more important. Don't get caught not voting, democracy depends on it.

By Dwight Adams

FRIENDS OF QUIET WATERS

Public input meetings will be conducted around Alachua County beginning as early as March by the UF Waterways Master Plan Team.

According to the group's website (www.alachuawaterways.org), "Alachua County has contracted with this team from the University of Florida to help prepare a Countywide Waterways Master Plan to ensure that its natural water resources continue to provide recreation in a safe and sustainable way well into the future.

"The UF team—with expertise in natural resource planning and management, recreational boating and waterways man-

agement, law, mediation and communication—has been meeting with the many interest groups that use county waterways, and with local governments and regulatory agencies."

They have been surveying the waterways and now will be putting forth their findings.

We need lots of people to attend these meetings to ensure that the group's findings and recommendations truly address the problems on our waterways, such as airboat noise, reckless endangerment, environmental protection and habitat preservation.

As soon as the draft and schedule are posted we will link it to our website (www.gatorsierra.org) along with our interpretation of the report. Stay tuned.

By Whitey Markle

JOIN THE BATTLE AGAINST GLOBAL WARMING

The argument about whether man-made activities that produce greenhouse gas emissions are causing global warming should be over. The question now is: what are we going to do to slow it down?

If we do nothing, how will our grandkids explain to their grandkids in about 50-100 years why we just stood by and watched it happen?

If we "think globally, but act individu-

ally," we can have a tremendous effect on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, primarily carbon dioxide released when fossil fuels are burned for energy.

The SSJ Sierra Club Group is initiating a Committee on Global Warming to attack the problem. If you would like to work on this incredibly important issue, email me at adams@phys.ufl.edu.

We will not have many meetings and will instead carry on the work primarily through emails.

Precise actions that we will take are to be determined, but they will touch all bases in seeking to modify activities that contribute needlessly to carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions. Actions might include educating skeptics (or those who just do not want to accept manmade global warming as a fact), providing suggestions on ways to reduce energy use, and seeking changes at all levels of government.

Human activities that consume fossil fuels might be grouped into transportation, creature comfort (activities that increase our utility bills), and products that we consume.

Most suggestions focus on reducing energy consumption, while others are equally important and can be implemented with lower costs.

Look for brief tips in subsequent newsletters on things that you can do to reduce your energy use.

By Dwight Adams

BEETLE, from page 1

throughout the country. Such action may have slowed the rapid spread to other water-stressed ecosystems. Florida Sierra has long advocated for the banning of cypress mulch.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Dr. Sydney Bacchus is the hydroecologist (NOT "professional geologist") who provided scientific comments to Putnam County Commissions in 2005 about harmful environmental impacts that would

result from proposed mining in a key cross-Florida wildlife corridor.

The SSJ Sierra Club group, as well as the West Putnam Lake Association, were objecting to the application by Florida Rock Industry to mine in that important wildlife corridor. The Putnam County Commission decided not to allow the proposed land use change (see the October/November 2005 issue of the SSJ newsletter).

Months later, the mining company's "professional geologist" filed a complaint

with the state against Bacchus over her comments. State officials are attempting to fine and prosecute her. Bacchus is raising funds to cover her legal expenses while continuing to warn of related environmental impacts.

Her multidisciplinary doctoral research on anthropogenic groundwater perturbations throughout the coastal plain includes environmental impacts from hydroperiod alteration and subsidence, including predisposition of native tree species to disease and premature death.



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MARCH 2007 CALENDAR OF EVENTS

FEB 23—Putnam County Environmental Council Program meeting, 7 p.m., Palatka Library. "Owls of Ocala," by Keith Belisle.

MAR 10—Family outing to track the wild and tend the domestic animals at Morningside Nature Center, 9 to noon. We'll start with a visit to the 1890's farm to feed the animals then do some amateur tracking with naturalist Kristina Jackson.

MAR 30—Putnam County Environmental Council Program meeting, 7 p.m., Palatka Library. "The Economic Values of Landscapes in Northeast Florida," by Dr. Alan Hodges.

MAR 31—Santa Fe Lakefest and clean-up. Call 352-475-1936 to volunteer at the information table.



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