

dumping and collecting and/or poaching of plants and animals. Law enforcement alone cannot put a stop to these activities, but one effective deterrent is to increase site use for low-impact, compatible outdoor recreation. Responsible users will act as eyes and ears for land managers, observing and reporting illegal activities. Poor planning or the failure to develop and implement appropriate site management plans, policies and procedures can also result in harmful impacts due to incompatible development and uses on or adjacent to protected lands. In the absence of site specific management plans with detailed site information and clear goals and objectives, it may be difficult or impossible to prevent ill-conceived proposed uses for preserve lands in the future. Development on adjacent land can cause harmful impacts, unless conditions are imposed to prevent or mitigate those impacts. Funding is needed to support an effective land management program, but administrators and elected officials need to hear from the public, or those needs will go unmet. A strong base of volunteer support not only supplements land managers' efforts, it also helps to demonstrate a high level of public support for the protection and management of natural preservation lands.

It is important to remind people that these protected areas have been established for our benefit, not just to prevent the loss of the native plants and animals that cannot survive otherwise. These lands are there for us, to provide a place to recreate, and to serve as a resource that enhances the physical environment upon which we depend. These lands improve the quality of the air we breathe; the water we drink, swim and fish in; moderate our local climate with cooler temperatures and more abundant rainfall; reduce flooding from storm-water runoff; and even have a positive economic impact by enhancing property values, reducing flood insurance rates, and stimulating tourism.

So please take advantage of the many terrific opportunities to reap the benefits of one of the best public investments that can ever be made for present and future generations. Protection of natural areas before they are gone forever ensures a better quality of life for all of us, whether we actually visit such sites or not. Why not maximize the potential benefits by getting out there as often as possible, just for fun? Better yet, get involved in the long term care of these natural assets!

Feedback:

We'd like to know how helpful and useful this booklet has been to you. Please send us an email, give us a call, or mail us a letter. Thanks!

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About this guide...

This booklet has been produced to provide information to the public about the vast inventory of publicly-owned natural preserve lands in the Tampa Bay region. The general area of geographic focus is a large portion of the watershed of Tampa Bay, including all of Hillsborough County and parts of Pinellas, Manatee and Polk counties. The categories of information covered include location; access points; conditions likely to be encountered on a site; the degree to which the site is accessible to the public, including trails, old roads, seasonal conditions, etc.; the ecological significance and public benefits of each site; special needs for protection and management; and how and why you, the reader can and should become actively involved in the protection and management of these very special lands.

The intent of this booklet is not only to provide the information necessary to locate and gain access to these preserve lands, but to do so in a format that generates interest and motivates the reader to visit as many of the sites as possible. By providing those who visit sites with an understanding of the ecological significance of these natural lands, as well as the need to actively protect and manage such lands, we hope to generate more support from the public for those agencies charged with stewardship of these lands. There is no disputing the fact that each and every agency involved in public land management needs more resources than are available to get the job done. More support from the private sector is essential in our current economic climate. This support can come in many forms, from participation in volunteer activities such as site cleanups, habitat restoration and trail maintenance, to simply voicing support for preservation programs in general when the opportunity arises. Even the act of visiting these preserve areas more often out of pure enjoyment of the recreational opportunities they offer will help strengthen preservation efforts by demonstrating grassroots support in the community.

Many people believe that, once a tract of land has been purchased for preservation, the goal of protecting the resource has been successfully completed. This is simply not true. There are many forces at work that inevitably lead to an ongoing decline in the natural conditions that merited protection in the first place. Non-native plants and animals are one of the greatest threats to natural areas everywhere, but especially in central and south Florida, due to our mild climate. These invasive species must be kept under control. Most natural communities in Florida are adapted to and even depend on fire, but naturally occurring fires cannot be allowed to burn unchecked in our developed landscape. Without fire, natural succession will result in a loss of habitat diversity, and the disappearance of many of the region's most unique native plants and animals. Land managers must use prescribed fire, a challenging and often misunderstood process, to maintain the health of natural communities. Unfortunately, many of the harmful impacts to natural areas are the direct result of illegal human activities, including trespassing with off-road vehicles, trash