



In the Woods

Late this summer, as part of a mini-vacation in southwest Florida, I visited the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, about 30 miles north and east of Naples in Collier County.

The sanctuary — 14,000 acres owned and maintained by the Audubon Society — is a wetlands area that's technically part of the Everglades. It's home to the largest colony of wood storks, which are federally protected, in the country. Some 700 acres of the sanctuary comprise the largest old-growth bald cypress forest in the world.

A 2-mile-long boardwalk winds through the cypress stands and other habitats, including a “wet prairie,” pond areas and flatwoods. The walk can be visually overwhelming, a 360-degree Clyde Butcher photograph every 10 feet. The old-growth cypress, some with nearly 500 birthdays, are particularly imposing, exuding both majesty and age. Stringy, gray-tinged bark gives them the aura of distinguished elderly people, compared to the more muscular profile cut by redder-barked old-growth trees like redwoods or pines. Several are home to ghost orchids, the ethereal flowers so beautiful that they inspire thieves.

The old cypress are monuments to endurance. Some have persisted after losing their upper reaches to storms; others wrestle, successfully, with vine-like strangler fig trees that snake up their trunks, trying to envelop their hosts.

Audubon has designated a handful of the oldest cypress, reaching more than 100 feet, with the names of either presidents or naturalists or natural places — “Roosevelt,” “Calusa” and the like. It's impossible not to ponder the fact that some of these trees have been in this spot since before St. Augustine was founded. To a greater degree somehow than a structure, a living thing with 500 years of tenure inspires awe.

Volunteer naturalists wander the boardwalk to answer questions about the flora and fauna, so you can learn things as well as just enjoy the walk. Things about how the water flows in a big, shallow sheet through the area, about how the birds choose where to nest. One particular green plant, I learned, got called the “alligator flag” because it grows only in water deep enough to accommodate gators resting on the bottom.

Both historically and currently, the sanctuary bears witness to the long-standing, tortured relationship in Florida between commerce and nature. In the early 1900s, hunters roamed the area and all but wiped out the population of egrets because the birds' feathers were in fashion as accessories on ladies' hats. Part of the boardwalk leads past a spot where the plume hunters had a camp. An early incarnation of the Audubon Society hired wardens to protect the nesting birds.

The cypress forests, of course, were once much larger,

extending west all the way to roughly where U.S. 41 now runs. Only the Audubon group's intervention in the early 1950s saved the old-growth trees in the area from being logged like the rest.

Fortunately, Corkscrew is in good hands with Audubon and will likely be here for many generations.

But there are similar places all over Florida that don't enjoy the graces of a well-funded non-profit. The state, with a thorough, detailed bureaucratic process, has identified those areas that it believes it should acquire, or finish acquiring, to preserve habitat for rare or endangered species, to help support water and wetlands systems or to add to recreational amenities.

Places like the Devils Garden Bird Ranch in Hendry and Collier counties, which borders several natural areas and is needed to complete the Florida Scenic Trail. Places like the Shoal River Buffer property in Okaloosa County in northwest Florida, home to several rare species and important to the water quality of the Shoal River, which has been designated an Outstanding Florida Water.

Here's a website with a list of lands the state has vetted for acquisition: dep.state.fl.us/lands/FFplan_county.htm.

The people of Florida have told our elected representatives, as clearly as they can, that they value places

like these. And that the state should try to acquire and preserve those lands. In the last statewide election, some 75% of voters wrote Amendment 1 into the state constitution to provide a dedicated funding source for land acquisition, allocating a third of the revenue from documentary stamp taxes.

In response, the Legislature basically told the voters to drop dead, allocating less than \$20 million for land acquisition out of an additional \$300 million available in this year's budget.

It's unclear exactly what the lawmakers were thinking. Some may resent voters' removal of some of their spending latitude via constitutional amendment. Some believe the state already owns too much property and can't maintain what it has. Some have chosen to pretend that Amendment 1's broad language means they've actually followed its dictates.

Nonsense. Voters in Florida sent a clear, unambiguous message that the leaders of both houses of the Legislature simply chose to ignore as they prepared this year's budget. The arrogance is breathtaking.

Once, if 75% of voters took a strong stance on one side of an issue, there would have been a political stampede to get out in front of it and lead the parade. Today, our lawmakers yawn. Their masters are the consultants and lobbyists who tell them how to vote, not the people who've elected them to serve. Florida is the worse for it.

The people of Florida have told their elected officials that they value places like Corkscrew Swamp.