

POLK GROUP

Issue: 07-06/07

FROM THE CHAIR...Al Greulich

The May meeting, at which the primary topic was land preservation in Highlands County, proved very useful in initiating a "spark" for some type of additional environmental lands preservation in the near future for that county. We had three concerned Sierrans from Highlands in attendance for the meeting, and I certainly appreciate them driving up to Winter Haven to participate. We had an open and creative discussion about how best to proceed and have made plans for a follow up meeting to try and move this idea along.

Highlands' citizens, Ben and Cindy Oswald, provided good information off the internet about what could become one of the first



parcels preserved in a Program for their County. They also had in hand a written testimonial from a neighbor who witnessed a Florida Panther crossing over this 28 acre natural area. An interesting fact that Ben uncovered about this property was that Jackie Gleason, back when his television show originated in Miami Beach, had once owned this lakefront scrub parcel and planned to build a hide-away "retreat" from Florida's Gold Coast. Mr. Gleason eventually sold the property and, fortunately, it has remained unaltered since.

Sierrans John and Marian Ryan, who helped initiate Polk County's environmental lands preservation program back in 1994, had useful information for a potential try at this in Highlands County. They reiterated what I have been saying in my past two "From the Chair" columns, that this will be a process that takes some time and commitment from all of us who want to see it succeed. Highlands County Sierrans such as Ann Hardy and the Oswalds are committed to try and bring forth more land protection in some fashion for their County. The

(Continued on page 2)



SIERRA
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JUNE/JULY 2007 NEWSLETTER

serving DeSoto, Hardee, Highlands and Polk County

PROGRAMS FOR JUNE 14 and JULY 12

In June join us for **Everglades: Restoring Hope** and in July for **Waters Journey - The Hidden Rivers of Florida**. See pages 3 and 4 for descriptions of the films and directions to the meeting place. A 'conservation related chat' will take place at Richard's Coffee (same building) immediately after the films.

THE 2007 FLORIDA LEGISLATIVE FINAL RESULTS

The 2007 Legislative session is now history and I will summarize the best and the worst of what was approved in Tallahassee this year. Remember a special session is scheduled later on to deal with property taxes and, of course, Governor Christ must sign any bill to allow it to become law. That being said, here are the four best bills and the four worst.

Winners:

- The Legislature was generous to Water (and Land) funding projects totaling 734 million bucks. These projects include monies for the Florida Forever fund and restoration of the Everglades and Lake Okeechobee as well as numerous water projects.
- Coastal armoring permits were made harder to obtain and provisions were made to improve protection for shore dependent wildlife. Basically we are talking about limiting seawalls along the gulf and ocean shorelines.
- Legislation was passed which expands the designation of the Myakka River as a wild and scenic area.
- A fairly complicated bill was passed which will allow local governments to designate growth in property taxes for purchase of conservation lands. For counties without an environmental land purchasing ordinance this will be a chance to acquire much needed funds for land purchases.

Losers:

- A bill that would allow special incentives for private funding of new roads which would create greater incentives for sprawl-inducing roads to nowhere.
- A bill removing major growth management decisions from State oversight. This will impact mostly the Miami-Dade area but we all can be affected.
- Creation of a fertilizer task force which will most likely delay the state from addressing fertilizer related issues for years. We need to act quickly on this problem not study it further.
- A bill limiting the duration of moratoria counties can place on rock mining even if those moratoria are based on sound environmental concerns.

Many environmental organizations contributed to the ongoing battle to protect the fragile Florida landscape. The members of the Sierra Club can be proud of our accomplishments this session.

....Charles Geanangel

(Continued from page 1) From the chair...

Ryans - Polk County residents - emphasized the need for the contacts that must be made to Highlands County officials and citizens to raise interest in environmental lands and that these contacts must be made by citizens of Highlands County. Highlands environmentalists have for many years gone to a lot of effort to care for the outstanding natural features in their County, and they seem ready to take on the challenges involved in this current venture.

In addition to the Highlands County members who drove up for our meeting, I talked to several concerned citizens who read the past two "From the Chair" columns and who offered to support this effort. I have learned that there are some Highlands residents who are quite well known in the environmental community and these persons could be of enormous benefit as we proceed. A high official at Archbold Research Center and a former State Director of Natural Resources are among the experienced voices who support what we are trying to do. They have shared creative ideas based on their vast experience that we certainly want to take into consideration; these two hope to speak with us in person soon.

They will have this opportunity, as will all Highlands Sierrans and other concerned citizens, when we have our regular October meeting in Highlands County. We have scheduled this meeting for the usual second Thursday, Oct. 11. We already have the meeting place established, which will be the headquarters building for the Highlands County Trails Association. This group is aware of Sierra Club's desire to become a force for more land preservation in the County and have encouraged us greatly with the offer of their building as our meeting place. Please, continue to read the information in our newsletter for more details and directions about the October meeting in Sebring.

FLORIDA'S SENSITIVE LANDS AND ATVs

Oil and Water

While hiking out of our property located in the Core Area of the Green Swamp Area of Critical State Concern, my husband, Ben, noticed that trails were being cut and orange flagging tape hung heavy in the trees and throughout the shrubs. Closer investigation revealed small tags with a logo very similar to that of the Florida Trail Association but slightly different nailed into the trunks of numerous long leaf pines and bald cypress trees. This logo (on an orange background which coordinated well with the orange flagging tape) and the letters "FTR" were emblazoned on the tags. The Florida Trail Riders Association "Responsible Motorcyclists" were apparently responsible for cutting trails across our private property in the Core Area of the Green Swamp!

An internet search revealed that the Florida Trail Riders were planning and were already advertising on the internet a weekend-long Quad Scramble (All Terrain Vehicle, ATV, races) crossing over sensitive private property without the permission or knowledge of the owners - trespassing. Camping was included. The fire threat, at the time, was extremely high to severe and the Green Swamp was the driest it had been in years with plenty of fuel to burn for months. One unattended campfire or thoughtlessly discarded cigarette or even a spark from the exhaust of an

ATV had the potential of igniting a fire in the Green Swamp that would threaten private property (including homes and livestock) and public property alike.

We contacted the person listed as the event coordinator on the event flyer and was advised that over 250 bikes were expected. Each bike represented a family that would be camping over the weekend. Riding trails had been cut



through sensitive lands and across private property; over 240 acres of this property are owned by absentee landowners who, for the most part, had not given permission for their property to be used in this manner. Two Hundred and fifty motor bikes had the potential of representing close to 1,000 people who intended to camp out and spend the weekend at this event without restroom facilities (in the aquifer recharge area of the Green Swamp), without arrangements for fire protection, without designated fire pits, without permission and without a business license to charge the fees that the internet flyer listed for camping and participating in the races.

Apparently, one individual who owns approximately 60 of the 320 acres in the section where the race course was cleared and the races were planned had misrepresented his holdings to the FTR and the FTR had taken him at his word instead of checking with the Property Appraiser's office to clarify true ownership, zoning and permitted uses of the land that they intended for the ATV races. One quick visit to Bartow would have prevented the FTR from trespassing, destroying private property and suffering the embarrassment of having to call off the races.

The event organizer was truly shocked to find out that he and his organization had been misled. We were sorry to bring a much anticipated and exciting event to a premature close. Ben and I enjoy riding ATVs as much as the next person but we wouldn't trespass across your property to do it and we certainly wouldn't cut down your trees to create a trail. Riding ATVs is not a crime but riding in sensitive lands (swamps, scrubs, wetlands, etc.) impacts natural systems, wildlife habitat and water quality. ATV enthusiasts need places to ride.

The stated purpose of the Florida Trail Riders Association is "To promote partnerships between the organization, private property owners and local, state and federal land management agencies." We strongly support these partnerships and would encourage agencies to identify, secure and make available suitable ATV riding parks coupled with environmental education so that these riders and enthusiasts will understand why certain areas are off-limits to ATVs and will be able to properly identify acceptable venues for their riding pleasure.*Rachelle Coleman Selsler*



Photo by Paul Gray

TWO BABY SCREECH OWLS

This Could Be In Your Yard!

Often there is a third owlet but the opening isn't large enough for it for three. Imagine the thrill you would have if you could watch baby screech owls take their first flights. Promote the possibility by installing a nesting box in your yard. Call 863 539-2251 to order yours; minimum donation \$50; all monies in excess of material costs are donated to the Richard Coleman Scholarship Fund.

EVENTS/ACTIVITIES

If you have suggestions for outings or if you wish to lead an outing, call our Outings Coordinator, Gail Bagley at 683-3334. For more activities/events, please visit our web site at <http://florida.sierraclub.org/polk/>

Service - The Saturday events in June are Ridge Ranger projects.

They all start at 8AM at their respective sites; if you want more details, call Lynne Flannery at 863 699-3742.

Jun. 9 Highlands Hammock State Park - Sebring. Invasive nonnative plant removal.

Jun. 16 Hickory Lake Scrub - Frostproof. Air potato pick-up.

Jun. 23 Historic Bok Sanctuary - Lake Wales. Stewardship.

Jun. 30 FWC Mountain Lake Scrub - Lake Wales. Trash removal.

Karst Documentaries

Spend hot summer evenings from 6:30 until 7:30 in the cool Multi Purpose Room of the Winter Haven Library viewing on the big screen with surround sound some of the most stunning educational films ever made on Florida's Water Resources. To encourage your participation, we have scheduled our June and July meetings at the library (see pages 1 and 4 of this newsletter). Popcorn and other refreshments will be available for a nominal charge during the movies or you are welcome to bring your own.

Jun14 & Aug. 2 Everglades: Restoring Hope. The film deals with man's detrimental impact on this massive wetlands. Then scientists carry us on a journey south from the headwaters near Orlando to examine what is being done to fix the problems in the watershed.

Jun. 21 & Aug. 9 Everglades: Currents of Change. This film provides us with a visit to the heart of the Everglades.

Jun. 28 & Aug. 16 A River Returns. Now we go on an exploration of the St. Johns from marsh to mouth.

Jul. 12 & Aug. 23 Hidden Rivers of Florida. Florida has the most unique concentration of springs on earth. A team of explorer-scientists descend into the floridan aquifer to trace the path of this hidden water world.

Jul. 19 & Aug. 30 Polluting the Fountain of Youth. This film is about an exploration of underwater caves in north central Florida.

Jul. 26 Ice Island. No - not Florida but Antarctica! A cool-down visit for the dog days of summer.

Jul. 27 Lakes Appreciation Month. Celebration at the Cleveland Heights Golf Club for all registered volunteers. This Volunteer Appreciation Dinner is being hosted by LE/AD for those volunteers who have cleaned up their favorite lake on a day of their choosing during July. To register call Johnna Martinez, Lakes Education/Action Drive Director at 863 221-5323.

Oct. 6 Kickoff Celebration - "Trek Ten Trails". Join us at the Ft. Fraser Trail, Highland City Trailhead from 6:30 until 7:30 PM - there will be GPS and fun giveaways, outdoor sports vendors, etc. More details will be in the August newsletter.

1st Saturdays of the Month Through Nov. **Colt Creek State Park** is offering free tram rides into the backcountry areas at 9AM. The trips will be led by naturalists who will help you identify the flora and fauna along the route. This new state park is on County Road 471 in the Green Swamp.

In order to participate in one of the Sierra Club's outings, you will need to sign a liability waiver which will be furnished at the beginning of the outing. If you would like to read a copy of the waiver prior to the outing, please see <http://www.sierraclub.org/outings/chapter/forms/> or call 415-977-5528. In the interests of facilitating the logistics of some outings, it is customary that participants make carpooling arrangements. The Sierra Club does not have insurance for carpooling arrangements and assumes no liability for them. Carpooling, ride sharing or anything similar is strictly a private arrangement among the participants. Participants assume the risks associated with this travel. Please note that some of the above listed activities are events that we think you will find interesting and fun, but they are not official outings.



**Sierra Club
Polk Group - Florida Chapter**

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or address.changes@sierraclub.org

JUNE MEETING

Thursday, June 14, 2007 at 6:30pm

JULY MEETING

Thursday, July 12, 2007 at 6:30pm

PROGRAM FOR JUNE:

Waters Journey - Everglades: Restoring Hope

PROGRAM FOR JULY:

Waters Journey - The Hidden Rivers of Florida

General Meeting and Executive Committee Meeting Run Concurrently

Note: Change of place for summer meetings.

In June and July the programs will be held in The Multipurpose Room at the Winter Haven Library, 325 Avenue A, NW, 863 291-5880. After the program a conservation meeting will be held at Richard's Coffee (same building) - beverage and deserts will, of course, be available for purchase. In August the program and meeting will be at the home of Al and Margery Greulich in Auburndale. Consult your August newsletter for directions.

Web Site: <http://florida.sierraclub.org/polk/>

Sierra Membership Application

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Phone (optional): () _____ F94Q W3311 1

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| <i>Check One</i> | Individual | Joint |
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Annual dues include subscription to Sierra (\$7.50) and chapter publications (\$1). Dues are not tax-deductible.

Please mail your check and this form to:
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