



Palm Beach County Board of County Commissioners
Environmental Resources Management

Northeast Everglades Natural Area



NENA contains a variety of conservation lands, which are owned and managed by a number of governmental agencies. State-owned lands managed by FDEP include Jonathan Dickinson State Park and adjacent lands along the Loxahatchee River that were purchased by SFWMD under the Save Our Rivers Program. State-owned lands managed by FWC include the John C. and Mariana Jones Hungryland Wildlife and Environmental Area and the J. W. Corbett Wildlife Management Area. ERM manages the natural areas purchased or leased by Palm Beach County, and Palm Beach County's Parks and Recreation Department manages Riverbend Regional Park and other parks in NENA. The City of West Palm Beach owns and manages the Grassy Waters Preserve, which also is known as the Water Catchment Area because it provides the drinking water for the City. Martin County voters approved referenda in 1989 and 1998 that provided funds for the acquisition of some conservation lands in NENA. Conservation lands within the Martin County portion of NENA are managed by the Martin County Parks and Recreation Department, by SFWMD if the lands were jointly acquired, or by FDEP if the lands are adjacent to Jonathan Dickinson State Park.

In April 1984 members of 14 environmental groups in Palm Beach County came together to discuss a common concern – the preservation of a significant portion of the Yamato Scrub, which had been proposed for development. They concluded that the native ecosystems in the county were disappearing at an alarming rate and formed the Coalition for Wilderness Islands (CWI) to work on this issue. In May 1984 the Royal Palm Audubon Society, representing CWI, proposed a program to the Board of County Commissioners for the establishment of "wilderness islands" representing the variety of plant and animal communities native to the county. The Board supported this recommendation and contracted with Dr. Grace Iverson and Dr. Daniel Austin of the Department of Biology at Florida Atlantic University to conduct a biological survey to identify the remaining undeveloped lands in Palm Beach County that contained high-quality native ecosystems. This study, known as the "Inventory of Native Ecosystems in Palm Beach County," was conducted in 1987 and 1988.

During this two year-period, the Board approved the formation of ERM and set up a citizens' advisory group, the Environmentally Sensitive Lands Acquisition Advisory Committee (ESLAAC), to advise the Board on which lands to acquire. Based on the Iverson/Austin report, ESLAAC identified 38 sites as suitable for acquisition and recommended that 14 of these be given high priority for acquisition. In March 1991, after an effective citizen-supported educational campaign, the voters approved a \$100 million bond referendum to buy these lands and others on the acquisition list.

Following passage of the referendum, the County took advantage of the State's recently-developed \$3 billion Preservation 2000 Program and obtained state matching funds through the Conservation and Recreation Lands, Florida Communities Trust, and Save Our Rivers programs. Through the efforts of The Nature Conservancy, with some support from The Conservation Fund, the County's contractors for negotiations with landowners, the County saved millions more dollars by acquiring land at less than appraised value. The County's land acquisition program was so successful that voters approved another bond referendum in March 1999, this time for \$150 million - \$50 million for the acquisition of conservation lands, water resource lands, and lands for open space, and \$100 million for acquisition of agricultural lands to preserve farming in the Agricultural Reserve.

Palm Beach County's land acquisition program set an example that was followed by other counties in Florida. In 1994 the National Center for Public Productivity at Rutgers University awarded Palm Beach County its Exemplary State and Local (EXSL) Award for having produced exceptional cost savings, measurable increases in quality and productivity, and improvements in the quality and effectiveness of government services. The County also received awards from the National Association of Counties and the Florida Association of Environmental Professionals for its land acquisition program.

By 2011 the County had acquired more than 31,000 acres of environmentally sensitive lands, ranging in size from 3 acres to over 12,000 acres, from the shores of the Atlantic Ocean to Lake Okeechobee and from the Martin County line south to Boca Raton. Public use facilities have been installed on many of these natural areas, the biological communities are being managed through prescribed burning and control of exotic species, school children are taking field trips to these sites, and the community is realizing the value of what has been preserved for future generations. The County is continuing to acquire adjacent parcels and "missing links" that will connect its public lands to other publicly-owned conservation lands.

Trails are being constructed in these greenways to allow people to travel from one site to another to see the real Florida and to experience the peace and pleasure of a day listening to the wind, the cry of a bird, or the rustle of an animal in the palmettos.