

Green Horizon Land Trust stays strong with its purpose

By Thomas R. Oldt, Ledger columnist

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Green Horizon Land Trust occupies a unique niche in the mosaic of Polk County's environmental movement. At once it is a barebones operation employing just a half-time executive director and an ambitious operation meant to create protected status for fragile habitats before flinty-eyed developers arrive with their bankers, chainsaws and bulldozers.



In part its outsized influence comes from a highly committed board of directors that utilize the trust to further its life-long commitment to protecting the land that not only sustains us — you know, food sources, green spaces, blue skies, clear air, pure water, that sort of thing — but also lends the beauty of nature to our lives. And partly it is the result of a growing environmental awareness by farmers, ranchers and other longtime property owners who regard the land as something near sacred and thus worth preserving in as natural a state as possible.

Over the course of its 28 years' existence the trust has been responsible for converting around 6,000 acres into conservation status — either by owning the land outright or transferring it to other entities that protect it. The focus is Polk but properties in Highlands, Osceola and Citrus counties have also benefited from trust protection.

Except where completely inaccessible, in most cases these properties are open to the public for low-impact uses like hiking and bird watching. Locating them is easy. Just click on www.greenhorizon.org and follow the format.

Prominent local environmentalists, Ken and Helen Morrison of Babson Park were joined by many others to establish the trust. It is governed by board members that include Tom Palmer, a retired Ledger reporter; Luther Parrott, former banker and trust executive director; and David Price, president of Bok Tower Gardens.

We spoke recently with Marian Ryan, current president of the trust, who has spent her entire adult life advocating for environmental protections.

Q. Looking at your extensive resume, it's obvious you've been involved in environmental causes pretty much your whole life. There's the Sierra Club, Friends of the Parks Foundation, Polk County Rails-to-Trails, Green Swamp Task Force, Polk

Citizens for Water, Wildlife & Wilderness, Lake Hancock Advisory Group — among numerous others. That's your passion. How did it come about? When did it arrive?

A. When I was little I thought I wanted to be a veterinarian because I wanted to help animals — but my idea of animals wasn't dogs and cats. As I grew up I realized the key to protecting animals is their habitat and so that's where I came from. You don't have to have any particular expertise to be an advocate for habitat protection.

Q. In your former professional life as an inspector and supervisor for the Florida Department of Agriculture for over 44 years, did you touch on that as well?

A. I spent an awful lot of time on dairy farms and there's a lot of wildlife to be found there. The biggest congregation of sand hill cranes I've ever seen was on dairy farms.

Q. What is the origin and role of Green Horizon Land Trust?

A. We started out with a focus on the Lake Wales ridge because that's a very important area that has been under-conserved. Over 80 percent of it has been converted from its natural ancient scrub to agricultural development. The white sand islands on U.S. 27 used to be actual islands when Florida was surrounded by the sea — that's beach sand.

Our main task is to facilitate conservation of important lands. Sometimes we facilitate transfers to other agencies, such as Hickory Lake Scrub, which we transferred to the county because sometimes government entities can't act quickly enough to suit a property owner. Other times property owners just don't want to deal with government but they will deal with us.

We are an opportunistic small land trust and sometimes people will leave us real estate that is no longer needed or wanted and we are able to turn those into dollars for conservation. We actually own very little but have a hand in quite a bit. Often we are just the holder of a conservation easement.

Q. How do you acquire major land parcels? Do you seek them out? Do owners seek you out?

A. Some of both. We've had several people approach us lately, sometimes by out-of-state property owners who just don't want to deal with it anymore or who have been paying taxes on it all this time without using it.

Q. One of the properties the trust owns outright is the Michael V. Lewis Arboretum, adjacent to Overlook Drive in Winter Haven. This 60-acre property was donated in two parcels over time by Talbot Lewis, who developed Orchid Springs. How did this gift to the trust come about?

A. Tal was interested in preserving his property because he had spent so much of his life fine-tuning it to his vision. It fit us and our purpose, so it worked out very well.

Q. What have been the environmental highs and lows in Florida's environmental world?

A. One of the highs for me was the passage of the Environmental Land Referendum in 1994 that enabled the county to acquire 26,000 acres of conservation land over 20 years. There's still some money left in the account to pick up remaining parcels in the Crooked Lake West project, part of the Lake Wales ridge eco project. That's a high, as was the passage of Amendment 1 a couple years ago — if only the legislature would do the will of the people. The legislature has been appropriating that money for general revenue, purposes that were explicitly not allowed in the referendum language despite its passing by 78 percent in Polk County alone. The legislature has not fulfilled the promise of that vote, which was to dedicate something like \$800,000 a year to conservation funding for acquisition, management and restoration. The money comes from doc stamp taxes on real estate transactions. The Sierra Club and others are suing to rectify. The case goes to court in July. So I guess that's both a high and a low.

Q. Does the county have an environmental lands acquisition program?

A. It has nothing now and that's another gigantic low.

Q. Where are we headed now? What is the mood of the county and the people on the issue of environmental preservation? Are we moving in the right direction, stalled or going back?

A. I think the people always want to conserve the woods they're familiar with. They don't want to see development across the street or down the road, especially if it has any childhood meaning to them. People don't know what Florida was when you and I were growing up and they don't realize the level of destruction that's happened, the alterations to the land. While a lot of people think it's more and more important to preserve what's left, it doesn't seem to rise real high on the priority list of those who are elected to represent us.

Q. Why?

A. Because Florida has fallen victim to the voracious growth machine. The legislature just passed that god-awful transportation bill that possibly will facilitate three new sets of toll roads, one of them through Polk County. To me, one of the worst things that's going on in Florida is what they allege is transportation planning.

Q. You see it as something else?

A. It's development facilitation. Growth by road planning.

Q. If you were the governor and legislature all rolled into one, what major steps would you take to reverse this course and/or to preserve land and/or to restore it to its natural state as far as possible?

A. Institute growth management with a focus on sustainability. That means you cannot rely on growth to generate your economy. You have to have some sort of sustainability to your economy that's not dependent on growth, which should be pretty easy to do if you put your mind to it. Look at all the orange groves that are deteriorating. One of our associated projects is the Windy Hill project in Babson Park. They want to do whatever they can to retain old or now non-existent citrus groves in agriculture instead of rooftops. The owners of the land are sitting on the fence because they don't know what's going to happen. If they get a major toll road a mile away, guess what — it's not going to be ag.

Other areas of the world seem to be able to create solutions to these problems. There doesn't seem to be a lot of that happening here.

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