

MANAGER'S REPORT, SPRING 2007

by Dennis Giardina, Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park

Friends of Fakahatchee,

Seeing that this is going to be the last newsletter until the fall, I will try to give a brief outline of some notable issues happening at or potentially affecting Fakahatchee:

We are still trying to build an addition onto the front of the Preserve Office that will function as an **information center**. The process has been more difficult than anticipated. Several builders have been contacted. One actually showed up to assess the job and returned a very high bid. I will be meeting with Collier County officials to determine what restrictions they will impose upon us to build a small (17'x17') addition. We will have to upgrade our bathroom facilities at the office as well.

A Level 1 **Archaeological Survey** has been ongoing for the past few months. A draft report was delivered to me on Friday afternoon and it is impressively comprehensive. Dr.'s Brent Wiseman and Jonathan Dean from the University of South Florida have overseen the field work and several friends members, Jerry Winters and Bill Paquin have assisted with data collection. The surveys will continue until the middle of June. I will be given a certain amount of copies of the final report to share when the survey is complete and it will probably be accessible on line as well.

Anyone interested to attend the public meetings to comment on the management alternatives related to the Big Cypress National Preserve **Addition Lands** can do so Tuesday May 1st at Edison College in Naples, Wednesday May 2nd at Everglades City School and Thursday May 3rd at the Weston Branch Library in Weston. All meetings will take place between 5:00 and 7:30 p.m.

We will be updating our camp owner records this summer by creating a data base that will include the names and contact information of **camp owners** and a list of the people who have permission to use their camps. We will create an aerial map of all the active camps and the approved gates, routes and vehicles used access private property within the boundary of the Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park. I have met with several camp owners over the past year and a half. I would like make contact with those I haven't met yet so that we can establish a fair and consistent policy, regarding the access to private property and the use of vehicles on the Preserve.

I have initiated contact with several contractors to submit quotes for a pre-rainy season repair of **Janes Scenic Drive**. The contract will entail the recovery of the piles of fill on the sides of the road (left over from a previous contract) and the repair of potholes along the entire length of the road. I have been given some funding to pay for a Department of Corrections road crew to work on the sides of the road to clear the vegetation. Ideally a DOC crew would do this quarterly. I am also trying to get Janes Scenic listed as a state road and not just "state property." If it becomes listed, DOT will pay for its right-of-way maintenance, perhaps more.

We have had several large **exotic plant control** contracts completed over the past year. A large area on the northwest side of the Preserve was treated in August and September for Melaleuca. The I-75 corridor, Jones Grade and Pennington Post Trams, including the borrow pit lakes area were treated for Brazilian pepper in December and January and recently a Lygodium or climbing fern project was completed inside the deep swamp in March. All these treatments were made through state grant money, totaling over \$100,000.00. I have written an additional grant proposal for FY 2008 for \$175,000.00 to treat Brazilian pepper east of the Prairie Canal Restoration Area along fire lines and trails in burn zones F-2 and F-1-A.



Brazilian Pepper crew with python at borrow pit lakes.

Fakahatchee received \$40,000.00 from DEP to pay contractors to clear **fire lines** in two separate contracts. One helped us open up existing lines after Hurricane Wilma and the other helped us continue to establish fire lines, including a several mile clearing on East Main Tram past the cabin. We have asked for continued funding for fire line creation and maintenance and we've been assigned some additional heavy equipment from District 4 this coming December and January. We anticipate more assistance from the D-4 burn team and firefighters from the Prescribed Fire Training Center this year.

We burned a total of 2,200 acres this year which is much less than we hoped for. The majority of this acreage was pineland in Burn Zone F-1-A on the northwest side of the preserve. High fuel loads and a desire not to kill pine trees necessitated slow-going and care during these **burns**. We attempted to aerielly burn a 4,500 acre area south of US 41 several times but were unable to complete it due to changes in weather conditions. We are currently preparing Dan House and No Name Prairies to burn in June. Our fiscal year ends on June 30th and we will try to burn another three to five thousand acres before then. We will be trying to burn as much as possible in the late spring and summer, after the rains begin and before the flood waters rise. This is called growing season burning, applying fire when it naturally occurred. If you go to floridastateparks.org/fakahatcheestrand I wrote about fire in the manager's message section.

We have recorded 29 **wildfires** on Fakahatchee or near the border over the past month and a half. All of these fires have been ignited by arson. We all want to burn but we have to do it within the parameters that the Department of Forestry controls. If a wildfire is reported, DOF is mandated to put them out. So, what the arsons accomplished this season was creating lots of bulldozer lines around small wildfires all along the State Road 29 corridor.



Wildfires circles in red, SR-29 in blue.

Thanks again to the Friends of Fakahatchee for contributing to the purchase of the 2007 Ford Escape Hybrid that has replaced Mike Owen's old GMC pick up. He is keeping track of its fuel efficiency and he will report on it in an upcoming newsletter.

We have a couple of **new employees**. One is no stranger to us; Karen Relish is back, working part time. She will be assisting Mike Owen with ecological data collection and entry. She will also help out with interpretation and resource management along with several other projects I have assigned her. It's good to have her on the team.

The new **Park Service Specialist** position was awarded to a Park Ranger from Eden Gardens State Park. His name is Bob Newbould and he was the unanimous choice of the interview panel. He has the kind of experience with construction, auto mechanics and heavy equipment operations that we really need. He was also recommended to us by Joe Webber, the master mechanic that has been staying and volunteering with us for the past couple of winters. Bob will begin on June 1st.

A new **Park Patrol Officer** has been assigned to work part time on Fakahatchee. His name is Curtis Parsons. His supervisor Lt. Todd Hand has been very responsive to our reports and requests for more law enforcement and he has committed Officer Parsons and other Park Patrol officers as much time as possible to be present on Fakahatchee. Curtis is a very personable guy with many years experience in law enforcement, including a long stint as a Kansas Highway Patrol Officer. He really likes being on Fakahatchee and he has been busy learning about Fakahatchee and finding his way around it.

As I mentioned at the membership meeting on April 22, the **Prairie Canal Restoration** is nearing completion. The bridge over the canal on Janes Scenic Drive at the Picayune border is gone. If you stand where it used to be and look north and south, there is a wide open strip punctuated with swimming pool shaped ponds for as far as the eye can see. The canal footprint will eventually convert to wet prairie vegetation and we will assist with periodic burning and exotic plant control there to ensure that high quality wildlife habitat is established.

Sometime in early 2008 the Fakahatchee **Unit Management Plan** will be revisited and revised. I would like to meet with interested Friends members and volunteers to establish a comprehensive plan for renovating or replacing the Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk and extending it so that it becomes a loop and outline the development of the Environmental Education Center, office and parking complex that will serve the Preserve, the Friends and the public for the foreseeable future. I am hoping to fund a lot of this through grant money associated with state and federal Departments of Transportation and state and county tourism development funding. The population of Collier County is going to double by 2050. Now is the time to lay the groundwork to protect the wilderness characteristics of Fakahatchee for wildlife and intrepid visitors while providing quality recreational facilities and experiences for the casual visitor.

Finally, on Friday night, **May 11th** at 6:00 p.m. at the Rookery Bay Environmental Learning Center, Mike Owen, Takako and Scott from Ten Thousand Islands NWR and Ian and Melinda from the Conservancy of SW Florida and I will present our 2006 expedition to the island of Utila, off the coast of Honduras in the western Caribbean Sea to assist the scientists of the Whale Shark Oceanic Research Center collect data and contribute to the conservation of the largest species of fish on the planet. I wrote a little bit about our trip in the February Ghost Writer. Now you're all invited to see our digital photography and video and hear our stories.

Have a great summer, everyone!