

GOODBYE TO THE HILLSBOROUGH RIVER WATERSHED ALLIANCE (HRWA)

After nearly 25 years of providing education, project management, and public outreach in the Hillsborough River watershed, the Hillsborough River Watershed Alliance (HRWA) is closing. The decision has been difficult. However, other agencies have grown or refocused their efforts in support of the watershed. The HRWA Board felt it was time to retire. Through the years, the HRWA has evolved and refocused efforts as needs arose. We are proud of the many HRWA accomplishments and its efforts in protecting this vital watershed.

The Hillsborough River Watershed Alliance (HRWA) began as the Hillsborough River Greenways Task Force (HRGTF). The organization was formed in February 1992. The primary goal of the HRGTF was to serve as a catalyst and facilitator for the protection, enhancement and restoration of the Hillsborough River Basin. The HRGTF was a consensus-building group that sought voluntary, incentive-based solutions to the variety of complex issues of the Hillsborough River Basin. Through the years, community partnerships grew and strengthened to the point that the HRGTF had become a well-known and respected organization within the Tampa Bay community. As the focus of the HRGTF changed, the organization became the Hillsborough River Watershed Alliance (HRWA).

The following describes the initiatives and efforts of the HRWA that have produced significant results since 1992:

THE "GREENBOOK"

The first major accomplishment of the HRWA was to work through broad-based consensus to produce the "Greenbook" -An Ecosystem Protection Plan for the Upper Hillsborough River: Issue Analyses, Action Plans and Recommendations. Published in 1995, this visionary report provides over 20 recommendations for the future of the Hillsborough River Greenway. This effort also defined and mapped the Greenway "Core and Buffer" Corridor as well as developed alternatives to fee based land purchases.

ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

The Hillsborough River was selected as one of six statewide demonstration projects headed and facilitated by the HRWA. This work included the facilitation of the Integration and Coordination Committee as well as participation on the Comprehensive Surface Water Management Team.

FLORIDA LAND TRUST CONFERENCE

To bring together subject-matter experts, interested landowners, and conservationists, the HRWA hosted and co-sponsored the Second Annual Statewide Florida Land Trust Conference in May 1999. The conference attracted over 150 attendees from across the State and Southeast.

FLORIDA GOVERNOR'S COUNCIL FOR A SUSTAINABLE FLORIDA AWARD CEREMONY

The HRWA co-hosted an executive forum in Tampa for the Florida Governor's Council for a Sustainable Florida Award ceremony.

CF INDUSTRIES TEAM PERMIT AND RESTORATION PLAN

Working with the difficult issues of integrating industry and ecological integrity, the HRWA brought together major local stakeholders to create a process known as team permitting, a methodology known as net ecosystem benefit (NEB), and a restoration plan to connect vital wildlife corridors. This was the first Team Permitting permit to be considered and approved in the state of Florida. NEBs are important to maintaining connectivity of the HRWA Core and Buffer lands as well as a sustainable watershed. Annual reviews of CF Industries' Restoration Areas were conducted in which the HRWA participated and commented on the progression with regard to NEBs and environmental mitigation/compliance.

COORDINATED LINEAR INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECT (CLIPS)

The HRWA created the concept of coordinating infrastructure systems to avoid and minimize greenways disturbance and habitat fragmentation. Along with local utility corporations and area government agencies such as the Hillsborough County Metropolitan Planning Organization and Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP), the HRWA created a voluntary incentive-based program to encourage co-located siting and design of linear infrastructure such as roads, power lines, railways, pipelines, and trails. This project came to serve as a state model and was recognized by the Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council's Future of the Region Charles A. McIntosh Jr. Regional Award of Distinction in 2003.

CONE RANCH

This large tract of land located near Zephyrhills had been identified as a source of water supply for the Tampa Bay community. The property is key to the hydrology of the Hillsborough River Basin. The HRWA created and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection conducted a pilot study to determine if the "sponge" concept would improve hydration. Consequently, the HRWA held a series of open forums for area stakeholders to create a position statement concerning the use of Cone Ranch as a wellfield and to encourage the use of an ecologically sound land management plan.

ADOPTION OF LESS THAN FEE ACQUISITION IN HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY

The HRWA, along with numerous other organizations and individuals, educated the Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners about how to purchase environmentally important land connectors through ELAPP and other outreach initiatives through the Less Than Fee process.

OUTSTANDING FLORIDA WATER DESIGNATION

The HRWA actively worked with multiple stakeholders to achieve the Outstanding Florida Water Designation to protect the Hillsborough River.

LAKE THONOTOSASSA RESTORATION PROJECT

The HRWA provided a public forum and coordination for government agencies, which resulted in a \$1 million project conducted by the Southwest Florida Water Management District.

PLANT CITY WASTEWATER REUSE PROJECT

The HRWA promoted the use of reusable water from Plant City to improve water quality in Lake Thonotosassa and its tributaries, Baker Creek and Pemberton Creek. Reusable water also provided additional Net Ecosystem Benefits through the reduction of groundwater withdrawal from pumping.

FROG LISTENING NETWORK

The Frog Listening Network (FLN), begun in 1998, is a citizen science-monitoring program that educates and engages Florida residents about west-central Florida's frogs and toads. Frogs and toads serve as environmental indicators because of their skins' exceptional sensitivity to changes in their habitats.

The FLN completed an invasive amphibian species study in Pinellas County through the support of the Pinellas County Environmental Foundation. The study found that although Marine Toads are not becoming more prevalent, Cuban Tree Frogs are.

The HRWA partnered with the Florida Aquarium to create an educational FLN exhibit called "Frog Music" that was located within the Aquarium's Wetlands Outlook Gallery. The HRWA also developed another FLN exhibit located at the Lowry Park Zoo. Both exhibits highlighted the species of frogs and toads found in the west-central Florida region. Other partnerships through the years included Busch Gardens-Tampa Bay, the city of Temple Terrace, and the Pasco County School District. The HRWA has created a full set of training materials to assist volunteers in data collection and general education. These materials included a full color laminated field identification cards, downloadable audio files, and a general information brochure about the FLN.

Supporters of the FLN included the Lowry Park Zoo, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission, University of South Florida, Tampa Bay Estuary Program, University of Tampa, Florida Department of Transportation, and many more.

"A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT" ANNUAL COMMUNITY EVENT

The HRWA conducted community education events called "A River Runs Through It". The events promoted the mission of the HRWA and provided environmental education to Tampa Bay area residents. Activities included canoe rides, nature hikes, educational workshops and demonstrations, live music, and storytelling. Supporters included Hillsborough County, and the cities of Temple Terrace and Tampa as well as numerous non-profit organizations and government agencies. An estimated 6,000 people enjoyed these events each year.

ANNUAL HILLSBOROUGH RIVER CLEANUP

The HRWA organized annual volunteer clean-ups of the Hillsborough River in partnership with the Mayor's Beautification Program and CF Industries. The clean-ups were conducted on the banks of the river near Crystal Springs, specifically along Highway 301 and State Route 39. Volunteers collected numerous tons of garbage from the upper Hillsborough River over the years in an effort to keep the river clean.

EARTH DAY COLLABORATION WITH FRIENDS OF THE RIVER

The HRWA hosted "Earth Day on the River" events in partnership with Friends of the River. The events were held at Lowry Park. Over 8,000 people attended each year. Events included children activities, several dozen environmental displays and other educational activities, and performances of local bands. This events were made possible through a Community Education Grant from the Southwest Florida Water Management District.

STATE RECREATIONAL CANOE TRAIL

The HRWA helped obtain a state recreational canoe trail for the Hillsborough River. The HRWA also assisted in creating a management plan for the canoe trail, and created educational brochures and signs to promote its use in passive recreation.

CITY OF TAMPA CONTRACT

The HRWA signed a \$20,000 contract with the City of Tampa to assist with facilitation between Hillsborough County and Pasco County for the creation of greenways, transportation, and wildlife corridors. The contract included public outreach and environmental education initiatives. The HRWA also assisted the city with the creation and development of the Significant Upland Wildlife Habitat Ordinance. The ordinance was written in partnership with numerous other agencies and stakeholders.

STURGEON GRANTS AND RESEARCH

The HRWA received a two-year grant from the Disney Wildlife Foundation for the study of Gulf sturgeon in the Hillsborough River and the possibility of its re-introduction into the river. Scientists from the Florida Marine Institute (FMRI) conducted the research. Nature's Classroom assisted the HRWA and FMRI by collecting data and teaching Hillsborough County sixth-graders about endangered species within the watershed. The study found that Gulf sturgeon can survive in the Hillsborough River, although the Hillsborough River Dam posed an obstacle to the re-introduction of the fish into the river.

STATE OF THE RIVER POSTER

Partnering with the Environmental Protection Commission of Hillsborough County, and others, to produce the first "State of the River" report, the HRWA graphically illustrated the status and trends of certain environmental indicators regarding the river's health including dissolved oxygen, total nitrogen, fecal coliform, and salinity. The poster described land use changes within the watershed over time, what kinds of plant and animal life may be found within the watershed, and how the reader may be a better steward of the environment.

FROG LISTENING NETWORK AND WATERSHED EDUCATION CURRICULUM

The HRWA developed a three-day classroom curriculum called Frogs and Their Habitats featuring the Frog Listening Network: A Classroom and Outdoor Program and Activity Guide. The curriculum was developed with the support of the Tampa Port Authority and taught the importance of wetlands and water conservation to elementary and middle school age students. The HRWA partnered with the City of Temple Terrace, Hillsborough County's Nature's Classroom, and Tampa Audubon's ARC at the Park to reach over 300 students.

AWARDS

- Received an award from the Tampa Bay Association of Women Psychotherapists for HRWA's consensus-based decision process in 2001.
- HRWA Director was awarded Honorable Mention for Executive Director of the Year given by the Executive Services Corporation of Tampa in 2001.
- The HRWA has received numerous statewide awards from the Council for Sustainable Florida including:
 1. S 2001- Leadership (Frog Listening Network)
 2. S 1999- Initiative
 3. S 1997- Excellence in Environmental Education
- Received a 2004 Water Resources Education Award from the Southwest Florida Water Management District for the 2004 Frog Listening Network Re-certification Workshop.

TRANSITION TO THE HRWA

In 2005, the Hillsborough River Greenways Task Force (HRGTF) became the Hillsborough River Watershed Alliance (HRWA). The focus of the organization evolved from reviewing documents and plans and managing projects to providing a location where all of the environmental efforts in the watershed could be shared and coordinated and a more intensive effort in education and outreach. The HRWA mission was to protect and enhance the ecological sustainability and quality of life in the Hillsborough River watershed through coalition building, research, education and advocacy.

A coalition of organizations met periodically to discuss the efforts in the watershed. This led to reduced duplication of efforts and a more efficient approach to educating the public about the need to protect and preserve the watershed.

Two "networks" were established to carry out the mission. They are the Education & Outreach Network and the Frog Listening Network.

HRWA EDUCATION NETWORKS

The Education & Outreach Network focused on key issues and initiatives and promoted community stewardship of the watershed through regular outings and activities. Watershed education was an important part of the HRWA. Through the Education & Outreach Network, the HRWA participated in environmental activities such as clean-ups, hikes, and canoe trips. This group also supported a variety of environmental education and public awareness programs and events that focused on the Hillsborough River and its watershed.

The Education & Outreach Network efforts included:

- Enhancement of the HRWA web site and affiliation with the University of South Florida Water Atlas program.
- Development of a HRWA Facebook page which included access to news and videos.

- Development of an educational PowerPoint watershed presentation and an average of 30 speaking engagements each year to such community groups as service organizations, chambers of commerce, homeowner associations, government bodies, environmental groups, and schools.
- A weekly e-newsletter focusing on environmental news in the Tampa Bay region and throughout the state of Florida.
- Honoring those who have made a significant contribution to the watershed with the Alan Wright Award.
- Providing a source for watershed residents to learn more about their environment and referrals to other agencies for additional information.
- Supporting other watershed protection activities in the watershed such as special events and workshops.

The Frog Listening Network (FLN) is a volunteer-based environmental monitoring program in which the public is trained to collect data about frog and toad populations in west-central Florida. The HRWA has partnered with Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo to oversee the FLN. Long-term data is collected to aid in examining population trends in our watershed. Volunteers learn how to identify amphibians both audibly and visually. A variety of training sessions are provided with varying levels of education. Audio files can be downloaded from the FLN web site to aid in learning each amphibian species and their individual calls.

The Frog Listening Network efforts includes:

- Collection of data.
- Frog listener training.
- FLN workshops.

The Frog Listening Network (FLN) will continue under the auspices of the Lowry Park Zoo, a long-time partner with the HRWA.

And so we say goodbye to the HRWA. There has been a long list of volunteers, partners and sponsors who have made the HRWA the success it became through the years. We thank them all for their contributions to helping protect and preserve the watershed.

Thank you for all of your support through the years.

Sincerely,



Stanley Kroh
President