

*Will conserving the lands alongside the Indian River preserve Vero Beach for future generations? The IRLT says yes.*

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# Vero Beach

## *Magazine*®

*The Indian River Land Trust:*  
Putting Its Trust In The Lagoon



*Will conserving the lands alongside the Indian River preserve Vero Beach for future generations? The IRLT says yes.*

## PUTTING ITS TRUST IN THE LAGOON

BY ANN TAYLOR



KEN GRUDENS

*Land Trust board member Char Higgins and founding board member/director emerita Toni Robinson share a passion for preserving special places for the benefit of the public and future generations. One of those special places is the Toni Robinson Waterfront Trail that runs across 40 acres of publicly managed parcels with oak hammocks, native scrub forest and mangrove swamps (see map).*

For Char Higgins, moving from Western Pennsylvania to South Florida meant not only a change of climate but a change in the scenery. “Where I lived before there were green rolling hills and here the land was flat and there seemed to be all this concrete. It was such a contrast,” says Higgins, remembering her first impression.

That was seven years ago and one of the first things she did was take her children to McKee Botanical Garden

and the Environmental Learning Center where nature is preserved, protected and celebrated. When she met Ken Grudens, executive director of the Indian River Land Trust, and heard about the work the nonprofit organization was doing to conserve the county’s natural resources she became a member and currently serves on the IRLT board.

“It’s good to be involved with something that’s bigger than you are, something that affects the lives of so



DAVID COX

*"Once destroyed, nature's beauty cannot be repurchased at any price."*

—ANSEL ADAMS, AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHER AND ENVIRONMENTALIST



Earlier this year the IRLT acquired Bee Gum Point, a key 111-acre property adjacent to Lost Tree Island that was previously targeted for residential development. As a result, the one-mile shoreline will remain a natural habitat for the thousands of fish, bird and plant species that make the Indian River Lagoon their home. many people,"



*Board members Grant Withers, John Johnson, Bonnie Veron and IRLT Executive Director Ken Grudens couldn't be happier about the recent purchase of Bee Gum Point.*

says Higgins. "It's easy to forget how important it is to preserve natural lands so that our children and their children will still be able to walk through the mangroves, see all of the butterflies, lizards, frogs and other creatures. Sometimes we take it all for granted and we really can't afford to."

No, we can't. That's why for more than 20 years the IRLT has worked to promote the preservation, conservation and improvement of the county's natural resources and special places for the benefit of the general public and future generations. And no one knows that better than Ken Grudens, who has been passionate about preserving endangered lands since the '80s.

"I was an architect during the boom times and enjoyed my work,

but I was always drawn back to nature," says Grudens, who soon realized that what he wanted was to be involved in land conservation at the local level where he could make the most impact. "After receiving a master's in Landscape Architecture I volunteered for a land trust in Albany while employed by the Hudson River Greenway Council. It was then that I decided this was the type of work I wanted to do. It's all about making choices."

When he learned that the IRLT was looking for an executive director, Grudens, who had spent five years as director of land protection for the Columbia Land Conservancy in Chatham, N.Y., viewed it as the perfect opportunity to make a significant impact.

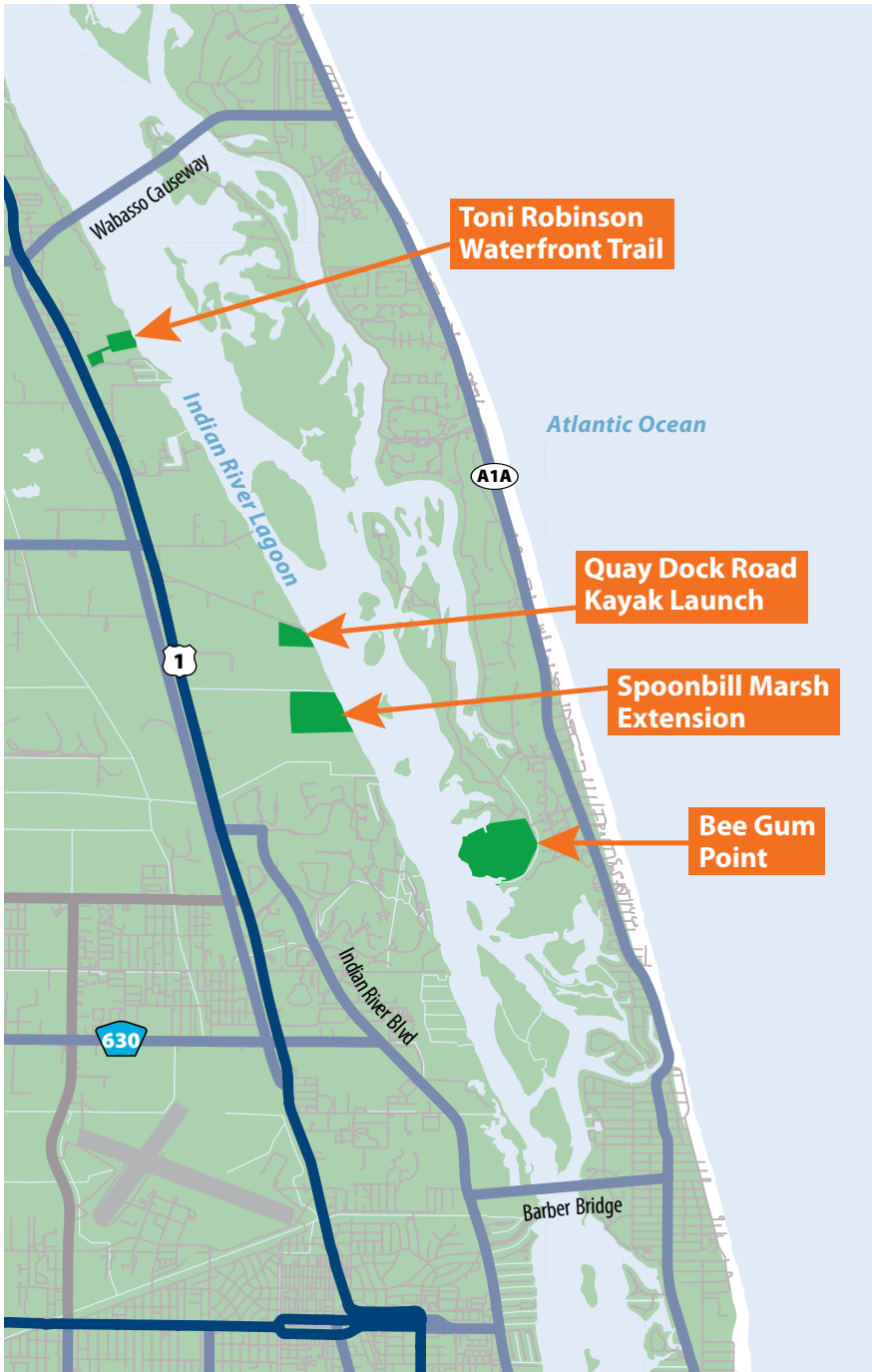
"The Land Trust had just completed

the McKee project, which was vitally important, and was in a position of reorganizing itself," he explains. "They needed someone to come in and re-start the organization and I'd had a lot of experience in land-protection work." As he speaks Grudens walks over to an enlarged map and points to Bee Gum Point, IRLT's most recent acquisition.

The 111-acre property adjacent to Lost Tree Island was previously targeted for residential development. Now the purchase of the last remaining undeveloped wetland on the barrier island, which has approximately a mile of shoreline, will remain a natural area for conservation, available for walking and bird-watching tours. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and The Conservation Fund, which provided financing for the acquisition through its Land Trust Loan program, have recognized Bee Gum Point as being part of the Atlantic Flyway, a major corridor for migrating birds and a key property in the protection of an important block of conservation lands.

In 2009 the IRLT leadership determined that the Indian River Lagoon, which is home to more than 2,200 animal and fish species as well as 2,100 plant species – and is designated an Estuary of National Significance by the Environmental Protection Agency – was its highest priority for protection.

As a result, Grudens and his land protection manager, Ralph Monticello, utilized a strategic approach for identifying undeveloped land fronting the river that was in need of protection. A computer-mapping process using data developed by the Florida Fish & Wildlife Commission allowed the IRLT Land Committee to prioritize parcels larger than two acres using a wildlife habitat-ranking system. Last year IRLT initiated



*A composite mapping process using data developed by the Florida Fish & Wildlife Commission has allowed IRLT to prioritize parcels larger than two acres along the Indian River Lagoon, which has led to the new purchases identified in green.*

efforts by entering into conversation with a dozen waterfront property owners on both the east and west shorelines.

“The Land Trust has three P’s,” explains Grudens. “*Preserve*

environmentally important land and wildlife habitat. *Protect* scenic waterfront areas of the river from further development, and *Provide* open space for public recreation and education. Much of what draws people



### INDIAN RIVER LAND TRUST ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Purchased and restored McKee Botanical Garden – a 10 year, \$10-million project.
- Established a fund to enable the protection of sea turtle habitats in the Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge.
- Helped lead a countywide effort for passage of a \$50-million Land and Water Bond Referendum.
- Developed the St. Sebastian River Greenway Plan to permanently protect this environmentally sensitive corridor.
- Assisted in the protection of more than 2,000 acres of agricultural land.
- Initiated the Lagoon Greenway, a multi-agency effort to establish and manage miles of trails and boardwalks through 187 acres of conservation lands along the Indian River Lagoon.
- Acquired eight acres along the Lagoon, providing public access to a 40-acre block of conservation land.
- Purchased more than 50 acres of conservation land along the Lagoon to protect the last remaining intact salt marsh in the county and provide a future kayak launch.
- Purchased Bee Gum Point, 111 acres of land with approximately a mile of shoreline jutting out into the Lagoon, which is home to 2,200 animal species including 685 fish species, 370 bird species and 2,100 plant species

to our county is the unspoiled scenic waterfront and the opportunities for public access.”

That’s what drew IRLT board member and real estate developer Kelly Kite Jr., who moved back to Indian River County five years ago. “I was attracted by the character of the area. It was so well preserved and it was important to me to keep it that way,” says Kite. “When real estate sales slowed down it allowed the Land Trust to purchase important properties, not just from an aesthetic viewpoint, but environmentally as well. No matter the type it is, there’s going to be run-off from construction and debris that goes into the Lagoon; there’s going to be damage to the mangroves and the native habitat that helps to keep the Lagoon healthy. The Bee Gum property was a major purchase and really put us on the map.”

That map was already showing signs of purchase progress, including 200 acres along the Lagoon south of the 17th Street Bridge. But although this assemblage of publicly and privately owned properties protected them from development, conserved vital native habitat and prevented shoreline

destruction, they were not made available for the public to enjoy.

In 2007 local citizen groups and the IRLT formulated the idea to create the Lagoon Greenway in order to allow for future access. Working collaboratively with a number of government agencies, IRLT completed a plan in 2009 to transform a 187-acre conservation site into an area that would be available to the public. As a result the trust became the lead partner and coordinator for the project.

The Lagoon Greenway project will achieve: 1) a convenient, accessible pathway system; 2) active and passive recreation options including bicycling, jogging, walking, fishing, kayaking and wildlife observation; 3) educational facilities and programs promoting land stewardship; and 4) improved natural resource management of the site and adjoining wetland and upland habitats.

In March, the first phase of the project, a parking lot and entrance running along the Lagoon northeast of Eighth Street and Indian River Boulevard, broke ground. Phase two, expected to begin as early as next



J. SCOTT KELLY

## A LAND TRUST TIMELINE

*Board members Britain Hogan, Louis Schacht and Paula Knier celebrate IRLT’s 20th anniversary at an annual membership event held at Spoonbill Marsh last month.*

- 1990** \_\_\_\_\_ Incorporated as a private, non-profit organization.
- 1992** \_\_\_\_\_ Promoted a \$26-million bond referendum for the purchase of environmentally sensitive land.
- 1993** \_\_\_\_\_ Established a fund for the Archie Carr Refuge for sea turtles.
- 1993-2003** \_\_\_\_\_ Purchased and restored McKee Botanical Garden.
- 2004** \_\_\_\_\_ Led the passage of a \$50-million bond referendum to purchase land and easements on natural, historic and agricultural lands.
- 2006** \_\_\_\_\_ Helped establish the St. Sebastian River Greenway.
- 2007** \_\_\_\_\_ Assisted in the protection of Treasure Hammock and Padgett Creek Ranches, a total of 2,000+ acres.
- 2008** \_\_\_\_\_ Pioneered a cooperative effort to establish the 187-acre Lagoon Greenway.
- 2009** \_\_\_\_\_ Acquired 8.4 acres on the river to establish the Toni Robinson Waterfront Trail that runs across 40 acres of publicly managed parcels with oak hammocks, native scrub forest and mangrove swamps.
- 2010** \_\_\_\_\_ Acquired 50 acres of lagoon frontage in Winter Beach.
- 2011** \_\_\_\_\_ Purchased 111-acre Bee Gum Point.

KEN GRUDENS



*IRLT Board Treasurer Kelly Kite Jr., Board Chair Stephanie Smith and Richard Paull, director emeritus, enjoy time spent at the Quay Dock Road kayak launch.*

*"Protecting our environmentally sensitive and culturally significant lands is important. I hope that we will all do what is necessary to capitalize on this opportunity to preserve the unique beauty and integrity of our Lagoon. The opportunity may soon be gone."*

—TONI ROBINSON



*In 2009 the IRLT board of directors decided that the Indian River Lagoon was its highest priority. As a result the non-profit organization will continue to preserve and protect the river's environmentally important land and water resources, providing open space for public recreation.*

year, includes elevated boardwalks and an observation deck. When completed, the Greenway will be conveniently accessed by means of public transit, car, bike and pedestrian traffic.

The map also highlights the Toni Robinson Waterfront Trail, a 1.6-acre parcel of native oaks and a 6.7-acre parcel with a quarter-mile boardwalk that runs through a native mangrove

swamp to a dock that extends into the Lagoon. The purchase of these two properties effectively opened a 40-acre block of conservation property to be enjoyed by walkers, bird watchers, nature enthusiasts and others desiring a scenic stroll in a quiet natural setting.

Then there's historic Quay Dock Road. Last August IRLT purchased four acres of conservation land on

the west side of the Lagoon. The property, accessed by an historic wagon road built in the 1890s and used by early settlers on John's Island to transport produce to Quay Station – now Winter Beach – contains mostly mangrove swamps and is adjacent to a small landing ideal for canoes and kayaks.

Other property purchases also dot the map and there are plans to add



*Last November the Indian River Land Trust acquired a 47-acre parcel of oaks, mangrove wetlands and an intact high salt marsh. The unique property, which contains nearly half a mile of frontage on the Indian River Lagoon, adjoins the county's Spoonbill Marsh.*

more, thanks to the efforts of IRLT leadership and supporters, and what Grudens refers to as “ambassadors” like Stephanie Smith, who became involved six years ago thanks to a neighbor and friend who encouraged her to find out what the nonprofit organization was all about. She now serves as chairman of the board of directors and advisors.

“I grew up in New Mexico and was used to having huge expanses of land around me,” she says. “I remember walking home from grade school and I could see for 50 miles – it formed in me an appreciation for open, natural space, so I was receptive. I saw becoming involved with the Land Trust as a beautiful opportunity to

preserve Florida the way it is with echoes of how it was.

“The more people who hear about the Land Trust and understand what it is, the easier it becomes for them to support us. We have something unique here and we have a window of opportunity to secure as much land as possible before prices go back up and before investors and developers begin to compete with us for these lands. Nothing disturbs me more than to see a place that has healthy, beautiful wildlife destroyed.

“This is really the story of the Lagoon and all those things that are what make Vero Beach the place we want to live. I look at it as a whole; I think about how we must preserve

those places that are unique and could never be replaced for the next generation and the generation after that. When I go out in my kayak and see the mangroves, fish and birds I think of my 8-year-old granddaughter Caitlin Bennett and her brother Owen. I want them to have the same opportunities that I have.

“I think giving someone a membership to the Land Trust as a birthday present would be a wonderful idea. It can introduce them to a new understanding of their world.

“I want people to take action and join with us – that way when they’re out on the Lagoon they’ll have a sense of belonging and realize how important conservation really is.” ❁