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**Land Trust's latest coup in preserving the lagoon shoreline**

STORY BY STEVEN M. THOMAS, (Week of June 21, 2012)

When the Indian River Land Trust took possession of 130 acres of rare natural habitat on Pine Island at the end of May, it was the latest coup in a strikingly successful campaign to preserve the natural shoreline and water quality of the Indian River Lagoon.

Combined with an adjoining parcel purchased in March, the donated tract creates a priceless 190-acre preserve for endangered rosette spoonbills, wood storks, herons and other wildlife south of the Wabasso Bridge and the Environmental Learning Center.

Since shifting its focus to protecting estuarine acreage in 2009, the trust has permanently preserved 61 1/2 miles of shoreline and 625 acres of environmentally sensitive property critical to the lagoon's wellbeing.

"They are doing a wonderful job of conserving properties that might otherwise be developed," says Warren Falls, managing director of ORCA – the Ocean Research and Conservation Association – which is leading the effort to map pollution in the lagoon. "By maintaining natural vegetation along the shore, they help protect the lagoon from polluted runoff. I hope they keep doing what they are doing."

"We really support what they are doing, getting private money to purchase conservation lands," says Richard Baker, president of the Pelican Island Audubon Society. "Besides protecting water quality, the mangroves and salt marshes they are saving are critically important nurseries for game fish and without them our whole sport fishing industry will collapse."

The Land Trust has turned out to be the right group at the right time for Indian River County.

By articulating a clear environmental vision and providing a professionally managed repository for unspoiled waterfront land, the non-profit has become a catalyst, activating latent ecological intentions and inspiring private philanthropy for the public good.

The Pine Island acquisition illustrates the synergy. The family that owned the 130 acres bought it to protect it from development and preserve their view of the lagoon. Land Trust Board Member John Johnson knew of the property and the owner's intentions and acted as an intermediary to help arrange the transfer.

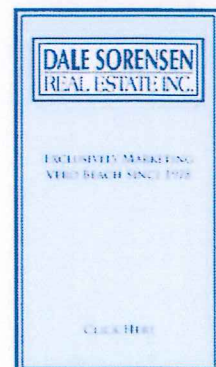
Had the land remained in private hands, the possibility existed it might one day be sold and developed. Now, it will remain in its natural state forever, protected and managed by trained conservationists.

The former owners will continue to enjoy the benefits of preservation without having to maintain the land or pay taxes on it.

"They know we will steward the land," says Ann Taylor, the trust director of development. "They have asked that we maintain the native species and keep out unwanted plants, such as pepper trees, and we will include that in our management plan."

The 60-acre adjoining property was bought at auction in March with \$50,000 provided by an anonymous donor who wanted the land preserved and thought the trust was the organization to protect it.

"I think it had probably been owned by a developer and John Johnson found out it was going to be auctioned off," says Taylor. Working with fellow board Kelly Kite and trust Director of Land Protection Ralph Monticello, Johnson led the successful effort to acquire the land.





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"This property has salt marsh, strong mangrove and a myriad of internal wetland ponds," says trust Executive Director Ken Grudens of the combined 190-acre tract. "It has a mix of wetland habitats that make it a great environment for a diversity of wading birds.

"Salt marsh is a dying breed in this county. Most of it was lost when they did mosquito ditching back in the 1940s and 1950s, so this property is especially precious. It is big enough and secluded enough to be a real harbor for wildlife.

"When we develop our management plan, we will do a census to determine what species are in there and what communities of plants and how best to enhance and protect them while providing some limited public access."

"We have management plans underway for all our properties," says Taylor.

The Pine Island tract is not easily accessed by foot or car. A gated subdivision lies between it and SR-510, the route that passes over the Wabasso Bridge.

Taylor says there are plans for guided kayak and walking tours of the property but that it will remain mostly undeveloped.

"We haven't talked with them about it yet, but we think there could be an interesting partnership with the Environmental Learning Center," says Taylor.

The partnership could include the trust launching its kayak tours from ELO's nearby canoe launch area and ELO taking schoolchildren to the property for ecological excursions.

The Pine Island acquisition follows a series of earlier conservation accomplishments by the trust, which was founded in 1990 to help save McKee Botanical Gardens, a 10-year, \$10-million project.

Following that successful endeavor, the trust was instrumental in preserving 2,000 acres of agricultural land from development.

In 2004, it led the effort to pass a \$50-million land and water protection bond issue referendum that was approved by 67 percent of voters, enabling the county to buy a number of properties.

With land prices skyrocketing, the county rushed to buy property before it became still more expensive and ended up spending the \$50 million at or near the peak of the boom.

That miscalculation on the part of the county magnifies the importance of the trust's efforts.

"The land trust has taken up the cause the county had taken up when it had funding through the bond referendum," says county Environmental Planning Chief Roland DeBlois.

"We have pretty much run out of money and the Land Trust has become the primary agency or non-profit out there buying and conserving land these days. They are definitely filling an important need."

"In January 2009, our board recognized we had a historic opportunity to protect the lagoon and habitat near it," says Grudens. "Because of the real estate downturn and failed developments along the water, extraordinary pieces of land were potentially available for conservation that would have been out of reach before."

According to Grudens, the board mobilized and "put together an all-out effort to look at properties along the lagoon and strategically determine which were most important to preserve."

The first phase of the effort was a mapping and feasibility study funded by a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service grant to identify all undeveloped parcels along the lagoon within Indian River County and prioritize them for acquisition based on their ecological importance and likelihood of availability.

The trust wants to get all the land it can while prices remain at generational lows.

"We don't know how long this opportunity will last," says Grudens. "Nobody has that crystal ball. But we are seeing more development interest and other signs the window may be starting to close so we are intently focused on acquisition. Our goal is to get as much conservation land as we can before the economy starts to come back into full swing."

The trust is an 890-member organization with a five-member staff and \$400,000 annual operating budget. Since 2009, it has raised more than \$8 million, mostly in private donations, to buy and preserve land along the Indian River Lagoon.

"We are very excited about the work we have been able to do," says Grudens. "We now feel we can achieve the vision of protecting the natural shoreline of the lagoon as you see it today."

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"People don't pick Vero Beach and Indian River County," says Taylor. "This place picks people. The quality of life that draws people here is heavily dependent on the lagoon and all the natural beauty and that is what we want to preserve."