

## THE LENGTHENED CHAIN OF SIMPLE BEGINNINGS

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The flow of environmental accomplishments which have occurred on the islands of Sanibel and Captiva over the past years should enlighten and encourage everyone.

Our environmental heritage of these islands was given us solely by the strenuous, energetic, hard work of those with intellect and foresight who endured struggles while envisioning the future.

In the 1930's a small group of islanders became interested in protecting the native wildlife. This group had little particular leadership, direction or influence until a gentlemen from Des Moines, Iowa-J.N. "Ding" Darling, came to Captiva. He was a fiery, spirited individual on conservation matters, a political cartoonist and a Pulitzer Prize winner.

Many of Mr. Darling's cartoons were about the extinction of wildlife, air and water pollution and the destruction of the environment. President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed him as head of the U.S. Biological Survey which later became the Fish and Wildlife Service of the Department of the Interior. He served from 1934 to 1935.

In the political realm Darling was largely responsible for securing 17 million dollars for wildlife restoration and can also be credited with instrumental involvement in the establishment of Sanibel-Captiva as a wildlife refuge. In 1945, Sanibel and the southwest tip of Captiva became the "Sanibel National Wildlife Refuge." The Refuge was administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service from their headquarters at the Sanibel Lighthouse. Their only control of the Refuge at that time was to ban the hunting of certain animals and migratory birds. Pursuing wetland expansion, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service purchased the Bailey Tract on Tarpon Bay Road and this became the island's first sanctuary.

During the early 30's a 1900-acre tract of mangroves and hammock land on Sanibel's northern shore owned by the State of Florida was beginning to be marketed to land developers. During the year 1936 Darling made vigorous objections to this practice but despite his concerns, this land was not preserved. Although Darling continued offering his efforts towards preservation, he became discouraged and in 1960 left Florida. In 1962 Darling passed away.

The press aide to Governor Farris Bryant proposed formal recognition of Darling's accomplishments and contributions to wildlife preservation. The Sanibel-Captiva Audubon Society quickly responded to this suggesting a memorial wildlife refuge. The "J.N. "Ding" Darling Memorial Committee of the Islands" was formed. Support was solicited for the Darling Memorial throughout the state. The Memorial Committee of the Islands joined forces with the J.N. "Ding" Darling Foundation of Des Moines, Iowa. This large incorporated organization was formed by friends and family of Darling. The primary objective of the organization was to further Darling's ambitions in protecting the natural habitat of the threatened islands [Sanibel-Captiva]. Intensive lobbying began in Tallahassee and Washington, D.C. and perpetual meetings involving measureless hours were held with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials in Atlanta.

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Finally, in 1967 land owned by the State of Florida, the School District and some privately-held land was acquired by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and this became the "J.N. "Ding" Darling Wildlife Refuge."

Today the J.N. "Ding" Darling Visitor Center has videos, maps, books, exhibits to relay the story of Ding Darling. The center, located at the northern end of Tarpon Bay Road, offers canoe rentals to explore water trails within the Refuge. For landlubbers there is a 5-mile road [Wildlife Drive] which winds through the Refuge so one may explore the Refuge either by car, on foot or by bike to see birds, alligators and a multitude of wildlife. The Refuge consists of 5,393 acres with 878 in surrounding areas.

The Memorial Committee met again in 1967 to discuss possible dissolution of the Committee. Wildlife officials urged them to continue to help combat the increasing pressures of impending developments since the construction of the causeway bridge in 1963. The Committee decided to separate from the Des Moines, Iowa Foundation and continue under the new name of "The Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation." The Foundation had no office per se, so meetings were conducted in homes, churches, motel lobbies or any place large enough for a group to gather. Foundation members decided the only protection for sensitive wetlands would be ownership of those lands. An intensive fund-raising and purchasing campaign began and initial efforts raised one million dollars which was used to purchase environmentally-sensitive lands which developers were destroying with bulldozers.

Today the acreage owned by the Foundation numbers 1,000 with future acquisitions contemplated. The continual growth of the Foundation properties requires management techniques and has created many educational programs. Research, education and habitat management are major Foundation challenges. Current projects include Loggerhead Sea Turtle recovery program, development of wetlands, restoration plan through surface water management, water quality monitoring, ecology of gopher tortoises, study of methods to eradicate exotic pest plants, propagation of native plants, monitoring of small mammal population and much more.

The SCCF center has a 4-mile nature trail and functions include a native plant nursery with professional advice on landscaping, a reference library, special school programs, guided trail walks, beach walks, natural history boat cruises, informational press releases and a monthly newsletter to members.

SCCF continues to follow the actions of the City Council, County Commission, and Legislature in Tallahassee and Washington, D.C. as well as a number of other groups and organizations. The Sanibel Captiva Conservation Foundation works closely with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission, the Iowa State University, the J.N. "Ding" Darling Foundation and the City of Sanibel.

With over 200 volunteers donating almost 1100 hours of professional expertise to SCCF, acquisition of laboratory facilities and graduate student housing has been made possible.

Although much has been learned about preservation, but there is still more to know about our fragile environment. The challenge is always tomorrow and the goal is to overcome all obstacles. No amount of praise is sufficient for those who have tread the waters before us.