

HISTORY OF CITY OF SANIBEL VEGETATION COMMITTEE*

And the seed was planted
And the seed grew
And the seed created an island
And the island flourished

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Thousands of years ago a mangrove seed washed up on a sandbar. Over time, mangrove seeds multiplied and grew into an impenetrable forest, a living seawall of many tangled roots and branches catching and holding sediment that washed in with the waves. The mighty mangrove sculptured Sanibel from a sandbar into a barrier island.

Sanibel has weathered many challenges: forces of nature, Native Americans, pirates (let's believe in them), lumbering, and farming. Now, as in the recent past, the island has struggled to maintain a balance between exploitation and preservation.

After the hurricane of 1926, Sanibel was covered with sand and shell. Today, it is a charming island still growing with beauty created by nature. The stewardship of man has strived for harmony with the island's natural systems by preserving wildlife and its habitats. Sanibel enjoys a great diversity of native plants, some found in only a few other places on earth. Native vegetation is critical to the survival of many species of wildlife.

The environmental heritage is the result of strenuous, energetic work by those who envisioned the future. In 1930s, a small group became interested in saving the island's native wildlife. They had no particular leadership, direction or influence until a gentleman from Des Moines, Iowa, appeared. J.N. "Ding Darling, an influential political cartoonist, was a fiery spirited individual on conservation matters.

Many of Darling's cartoons addressed the threat of wildlife extinction, 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. Darling served from March of 1934 to November of 1935.

During 1936, Darling objected vigorously to the bulldozing of the northern shore of Sanibel. Land, sold by the State of Florida, rich in mangroves and hammocks, was being marketed by land developers. Despite Darling's concerns, the land was not preserved, but with his persistent efforts, Sanibel and Captiva were designated as a wildlife refuge by a special act of the Florida Legislature in 1939. In 1945, with the help of Darling, portions of Sanibel and Captiva became the Sanibel National Wildlife Refuge, administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Darling continued offering his support toward preservation until he left Florida in 1960. He passed away in 1962.

A press-aide to Florida's Governor Farris Bryant(1961-1965) suggested Sanibel form a Memorial Committee to recognize Darling. The islanders quickly responded. Emmy Lu Lewis, part-time resident and interested conservationist, headed the group, and with the help of the Audubon Society, solicited statewide support. In 1967, land owned by the State of Florida, by the school district and some by private owners, was acquired by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Sanibel National Wildlife Refuge and the 1967 land acquisition became known as the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge, a formal recognition of Darling's accomplishments and contributions.

The Memorial Committee was renamed "The Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation." Fish and Wildlife officials urged SCCF to continue to help combat the increasing pressures of impending development after the construction of the causeway in 1963. A sea of faces appeared over this new, arched structure. Masses of people visited, and even wanted to live on Sanibel.

Many islanders understood the future consequences of this influx. At that time, Sanibel was under the rule of Lee County but the Commission's philosophy was to serve people not birds.

Events started to change this laid-back, peaceful community. There were 175 junk cars removed, mainly from the refuge. Some land owners began to strip and clear vegetation so their land could be sold. It became a time of critical concern. There is story after story of how people worked hard to save the island's natural systems.

Ann Winterbotham served as chairperson of the Sanibel Captiva Conservation Foundation and the Sanibel Planning Commission. Ann and her husband moved to Sanibel in 1964. They had no knowledge of the native vegetation. Their landscaper's design called for Australian pines, melaleuca and Brazilian pepper. Today, in the State of Florida, it is illegal to plant these non-native invasive trees. The proliferation of these weed trees stimulated an effort to educate people on the islands about the benefits of native plants.

Something was needed to popularize the use of Sanibel's native plants for landscaping. Ann and Mada Harrison, a member of SCCF, found the most informative references about Sanibel's native plants at that time, were in George Cooley's scientific papers published in "Rhodora" *Journal of the New England Botanical Club Oct. 1955*, Arnold Arboretum at Harvard University.

Ann and Mada became very knowledgeable about native vegetation and collected plants from all over the island to exhibit them at Sanibel's shell fairs. One day, they were busy digging up plants on the bayside in Francis Bailey's yard, at the original site of Bailey's store. He came out and asked, "What are you doing?" And they replied, "We're just saving these plants, Francis." He let them take the plants.

In 1973, Ann and Mada put together an identification book, "*Native Trees and Shrubs for Captiva-Sanibel Landscaping*." Mada was the author and Ann drew the illustrations.

Dick Workman came to Sanibel in 1973 to fill the position as the administrative director of SCCF. He began a newspaper column, "Growing Native" in the **Island Reporter** to continue the native plant education that Ann and Mada had started. Later, selections from the columns were consolidated into his book "*Growing Native*" published in 1980 by the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation.

Before the city's incorporation, Dick Workman took Porter Goss for a canoe ride along with George Campbell, a wildlife enthusiast, to show them what had happened to the Johnston tract. On the way, George rocked the boat. Without hesitation, he jumped into the water to capture a banded water snake. When the tract of land came into view they were devastated. The vegetation had been completely stripped away.

One Sunday, Ann Winterbothom, then the chairperson of the Planning Commission, went with a land engineer to look at a piece of property for development. He insisted it was not a wetland and she knew that it was. When they arrived, Ann stepped off the road up to her waist in water with fish swimming around her.

After extensive legal work, Sanibel incorporated as a city in 1974. United States C.I.A. Director Porter Goss was the first Mayor of Sanibel. A priority of the new city was to develop an ordinance to prohibit the kind of wholesale clearing that was going on.

Branches of government were departmentalized and ordinances needed to be defined and written. Councilman Charles LeBuff drafted the ordinance that created the Vegetation Committee. Dick Workman became the first chairman of the newly formed Committee in 1975. The city manager, David Bretsky, and the Vegetation Committee wrote the first ordinance. But

the city attorney, Neal Bowen, felt it was not workable and needed revising before it could be challenged.

The city was trying to protect what it had, but it was difficult to convince people that what the city was doing was important. Before an area of land was developed the owner had to consult with the Vegetation Committee to see what native plants should be saved. Some people were dissatisfied with this arrangement. They wanted to plant their own choices of vegetation and did not want to be regulated.

This became a major issue for the Vegetation Committee. As a result, the Committee's approach was to have a vegetation member inspect the property and hopefully meet with the owner to explain the benefits of the city's ordinance, and provide assistance in planning the landscape.

George Campbell was the next chairman of the Vegetation Committee. He felt the success of the Committee was its one-on-one interaction. He said, "People moving here do not know the difference between a hibiscus and a wild coffee plant."

The "Sanibel Report" documented what was native to the island and what needed to be protected. The Report was written in 1975 by John Clark, who authored many books on coastal management and worked for the Conservation Foundation in Washington D.C. This Report was primarily funded by SCCF. (The Conservation Foundation in Washington D.C. and the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation are separate entities.)

During the summer of 1975, islanders contributed many hours of their time to assist in the collection of data for the city's guide book. Highly qualified experts from around the country, under the supervision of the Sanibel Planning Commission, wrote the "Sanibel

Comprehensive Land Use Plan.” This was adopted on July 19, 1976 and based on the “Sanibel Report.”

People who owned large pieces of land gradually realized that removing all the vegetation was not the way to sell property. Following the ordinances, resulting from the “Sanibel Comprehensive Land Use Plan,” would be a more profitable way. Most realtors began to understand that prospective buyers came here for the island’s natural beauty.

With the increase of building, the city began to realize it needed more meaningful protection for sensitive wetlands and local zoning was not enough. Over the years, intensive fund-raising and land-purchasing by SCCF has continued. Likewise, the City of Sanibel has been buying land for the purposes of conservation.

Since the founding of the Vegetation Committee in 1975, there have been approximately 8,000 vegetation field inspections done by Committee members. Many people and organizations have helped city government preserve the natural systems and the Vegetation Committee has played an important role in leadership.

The Vegetation Committee’s success has come about through personal contact with homeowners, supplemented by educational information. When a homeowner is not present during an inspection and there’s a problem with the vegetation, a meeting is set up with the building contractor. If the problem cannot be solved, then it is handled by the City’s Natural Resource Director.

Educating the public about conservation matters is always of prime importance. People who protect and care for natural resources help preserve a healthy ecological system.

The Vegetation Committee's duties as established by the city ordinance are:

"Sec. 2.48. Duties

The Vegetation Committee shall advise the Planning Commission, the City Council and the city manager about sound ecological management of vegetative resources in the city and may review and comment about proposed development. The committee should collect, analyze and disseminate information on basic ecological principles as they relate to island vegetation. The committee should, in addition, make available to the best of its ability expert technical assistance for any person on the island who desires advice concerning clearing or landscaping for a development activity. Such assistance shall include, but not be limited to the identification of individual specimens of vegetation that should be preserved, advice on arrangements for transplanting of individual specimens to other parcels on the island, and the location of appropriate native species for landscaping.(Ord.No. 76-28, 3,7-19-76)"

Members of the Vegetation Committee are certified vegetation inspectors.

The Vegetation Committee meets the first Thursday of each month at 1:30 at City Hall.

The public is invited.

An inspector signs up for a day of vegetation inspection for the following month.

The inspector picks up an application for a vegetation inspection at the planning dept.

An on-site inspection follows.

Native plants are identified and inventoried.

Impacted vegetation within building-site is moved and transplanted by contractor.

The inspector may recommend a change in the site-plan to preserve native vegetation.

The report is then routed to a city planner for further review.

Before a certificate of occupancy is issued a final vegetation inspection is required.

All pre-existing native plants have to be verified and replaced if missing.