

A History of the City of Sanibel Vegetation Committee

By Berdenna Thompson

Thousands of years ago a mangrove seed washed up on a sandbar. Over time, these first 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 (maybe, maybe not), 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 whose ambience and beauty are created by nature. The stewardship of man has striven 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. And native vegetation is critical to the survival of many species of wildlife.

This environmental heritage is the result of strenuous, energetic work by those who envisioned the future. In the 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 spokesman on conservation matters.

Many of his cartoons addressed the threat of wildlife extinction, air and water pollution, and the destruction of the environment. President Franklin Roosevelt appointed him head of the U.S. Biological Survey (later the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service of the Department of the Interior) where he served from March of 1934 to November of 1935.

During 1936, Darling objected vigorous-



Renny Severance photo

Berdenna Thompson, a long-time Vegetation Committee member, founder of The Sanibel School's celebration of Arbor Day and author of this article, appreciates the help of all those who contributed to the writing of this article which has been approved by Sanibel Vegetation Committee.

ly to the bulldozing of the northern shore of Sanibel. Land which had been sold by the State of Florida for mere pennies per acre — land rich in mangroves and upland hammocks — was being cleared and marketed by developers. In spite of Darling's concerns and ongoing protests, the land was not preserved but, with because of his persistent efforts, in 1939, Sanibel and Captiva were designated as a wildlife refuge by a special act of the Florida Legislature. In 1945, with Darling's help, portions of the two islands became the Sanibel National Wildlife

Refuge, administered by the Fish & Wildlife Service. Darling continued offering his support for preservation until he left Florida in 1960. He passed away in 1962.

A press-aide to Florida's Governor Farris Bryant (1961-1965) then suggested Sanibel form a committee that would appropriately memorialize Darling. Led by Emmy Lu Lewis, a part-time resident and ardent conservationist, a group of islanders, with the help of the Audubon Society, solicited statewide support for their cause.

In 1967, a large parcel of lands, variously owned by the State of Florida, the school district and private owners, was acquired by the U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service and, combined with the Sanibel National Wildlife Refuge, became known as the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge — a formal recognition of Darling's many accomplishments and contributions.

The Memorial Committee, instead of disbanding, was renamed the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation and went to work to help combat the increasing pressures of impending development after the construction of the causeway in 1963. Masses of people were visiting; some even wanted to make their homes on Sanibel.

Numerous islanders understood the future consequences of this influx... There is story after story of how people worked hard to save the island's natural systems. But, at that time, Sanibel was under the rule of Lee County, and the County Commission's philosophy was to serve people not birds. Many land owners completely stripped their properties, clearing away all vegetation so their land could be sold for development.

It was a time of critical concern.

When Ann Winterbotham and her husband moved to Sanibel in 1964, they had no knowledge of the native vegetation. In fact, their landscaper's design called for Australian pines, melaleuca and Brazilian pepper — non-native invasive trees which today, in the State of Florida, it is illegal to plant. The proliferation of these weed trees stimulated efforts 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 was chairperson of the Conservation Foundation, and she and Mada Harrison, another member of SCCF, found that, at that time, the most information about Sanibel's native plants was in George Cooley's scientific papers which had been published 10 years earlier in *Rhodora*, the *Journal of the New England Botanical Club*.

Ann and Mada made themselves very knowledgeable about native vegetation and collected plants from all over the island to exhibit at Sanibel's Shell Fairs. In 1973, they put together an identification book, *Native Trees and Shrubs for Captiva-Sanibel Landscaping*. Mada was the author and Ann, an accomplished wildlife artist, drew the illustrations.

Dick Workman came to Sanibel in 1973 as administrative director of SCCF. He began a newspaper column, "Growing Native" in the *Island Reporter* in order to continue the native plant education that Ann and Mada had started. (Selections from these columns became his book, *Growing Native*, published in 1980 by SCCF.)

Before the city's incorporation, Workman took island resident Porter Goss for a canoe ride along with George Campbell, a wildlife enthusiast, to show them what had happened to the mid-island Johnston tract. On the way, George jumped into the water to capture a banded water snake. When the tract of land they were headed for came into view they were devastated — the lush vegetation was gone.

One Sunday, Winterbotham, by then the chair of the Planning Commission, went with a land engineer to look at a piece of property proposed for development. The engineer insisted it was not a wetland; she knew it was. When they arrived, Ann stepped off the road... up to her waist in water and fish.

After several years of heated discussion, extensive legal work, and a referendum, Sanibel incorporated as a city in 1974. Goss was its first Mayor. One of the new city's priorities was to develop an ordinance that

See COMMITTEE
page 18

COMMITTEE

From page 7

would prohibit the wholesale clearing of land.

Branches of government were established, and ordinances needed to be defined and written. Councilman Charles LeBuff drafted the one that created the Vegetation Committee, and Workman became its first chairman in 1975. City Manager David Bretsky and the Vegetation Committee together wrote the first ordinance. But the city attorney, Neal Bowen, felt it was not workable and needed considerable revision before it could be implemented.

The city was trying to protect what it had, but it was difficult to convince the population 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 because they wanted to choose their own plants and not have someone else tell them what they could use.

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

Campbell was the next chairman of the Vegetation Committee. He felt the success of the Committee was its one-on-one interaction with homeowners, pointing out, "People moving here don't know the difference between a hibiscus and a wild coffee."

The Sanibel Report documented what was native to the island and what needed to be protected. Written in 1975 by John Clark, author of many books on coastal management for the Conservation Foundation in Washington D.C., the Report was primarily funded by SCCF. (The Conservation Foundation 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 land use plan. Highly qualified experts from around the country, under the supervision of the Sanibel Planning Commission, wrote the Sanibel Comprehensive Land Use Plan (CLUP). It was based on the Sanibel Report and adopted on July 19, 1976.

People who owned large pieces of land gradually realized that removing all vegetation was not the way to sell property. Following the new ordinances in the CLUP would be more profitable. And most realtors began to understand that prospective buyers came here for the island's natural beauty.

As development increased, the new city began to realize it needed more meaningful protection for its sensitive wetlands and unique freshwater interior wetlands, in particular; local zoning was not enough. SCCF's intensive fund-raising and pursuant purchases, primarily of wetlands, were helping, but the City of Sanibel also bought many acres for the purpose 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 leadership role.

The Committee's success has come about through personal contact with homeowners, supplemented by ongoing educational efforts. When a homeowner is not present during an inspection and there's a problem with the vegetation, a meeting is set up with the contractor. If the problem still cannot be solved, 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

See COMMITTEE page 22



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TUESDAY PRIME TIME

Table of Tuesday Prime Time TV schedule for May 20, 2003, listing channels, times, and program titles.

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Table of Wednesday Prime Time TV schedule for May 21, 2003, listing channels, times, and program titles.

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