

News from the Watershed

The Ridge we live on

Many people may not know that much of Highlands County is part of the Lake Wales Ridge, which runs about 100 miles down the center of Florida. Most of the Ridge is less than 10 miles wide so a good portion of it is very near to US 27. Now this may not seem like an important fact to you, but perhaps if you knew more about this unique place, you would appreciate the value of the ridge you live on.

The Lake Wales Ridge is very unique because hundreds of thousands of years ago it was actually a group of islands rising above the ocean that covered what is now Florida. These areas have a much higher elevation, approximately 300 feet above sea level, than the rest of our state. Another value of the ridge is that the sandy soil allows the rain water to drain into the Florida aquifer, which is our main source of drinking water. The ridge is made up of scrub habitat which houses many rare and unique plants and animals that can be found no where else. In fact, of these, 19 species of plants and 5 species of animals are federally protected.

It is said that the first inhabitants of the Lake Wales Ridge were Native Americans from about 8000-9000 years ago. The use of the land increased several thousand years later when the area became more inhabitable and lakes began to form. It is believed that the Native Americans that lived on the ridge did not farm or raise animals, but lived off the land.

Today, the ridge is still home to many unique species such as the Florida scrub-jay, sand skink, gopher tortoise and the Lake Placid scrub mint, an endangered plant, which lives only in a small area near the town of Lake Placid. As most of you know, the scrub-jay is a unique bird that can only survive in the scrub habitat. They depend on the food sources of the area for their existence. In addition, these birds are family oriented and depend on scrub for their territories for past and future generations.

Unfortunately, about 85 percent of the Lake Wales Ridge has been developed. The high elevation and sandy soils have attracted development of many kinds. Citrus groves, cattle ranches and residences have dotted the ridge over the years.

The good news is that many agencies have recognized the value of this area and have taken steps to conserve some of the remaining land. As stated above, protection of many of the rare and endangered species has been implemented. Recreational activities such as hiking, biking and picnicking are available in certain areas of the protected land. Many organizations and governmental agencies are involved in the protection of this unique area of Florida.

Still, there is much to be done if we want future generations to enjoy the ridge. Since so many of the organisms cannot survive elsewhere, it is critical that we take steps to continue to protect and conserve them. Threats to this ecosystem exist and steps must be taken to resolve them. Some of these challenges include continuing development and destruction of the natural areas. In addition, the ridge is a fire dependent plant community and as a result of the development, fire has been eliminated from most of the areas. Because natural fire no longer occurs, the once healthy plant

community has been compromised and vegetation has accumulated in areas making a catastrophic wildfire more probable. In addition, many of the food sources for the species that thrive there are no longer available because fire dependent plants need to be burned occasionally to produce. Another problem that faces the ridge is the introduction of exotic plants, which will choke out the native species and cause much damage to the natural environment.

We cannot leave everything to the organizations that have made such tremendous efforts to protect this area. There are steps each of us can take to assist such as:

- Don't plant exotic plants in your area and remove those that are already there; even though you may not think that those species can affect the ridge, exotics generally spread rapidly and can be propagated by animals and wind.
- Be educated and informed about your local environment. Keep up with what your local government and other agencies are doing about this area. Make your voice heard on issues concerning natural areas such as this.
- Get involved with volunteer agencies and environmental groups regarding the conservation of the ridge area.

For more information on how you can protect and conserve the natural resources in your area, please visit our website at <http://www.highlandswcd.org/> or call us at (863) 402-6545.