

Fire is an essential element for our natural areas  
By: Corine Burgess

The Sun 'n Lake Preserve got hot and smoky on September 22<sup>nd</sup>. A 200 acre prescription burn was conducted by a team of various environmental agencies. Jack Stites of Wildland Resources was in charge of the burn and was assisted by his lovely wife, Annie and several members of The Nature Conservancy's burn team. Also helping out were Highlands County's Parks and Natural Resources team, Danny Copeland, Richard Haley and Corine Burgess. If smoke got in your eyes or you wonder why perfectly sane people would intentionally set fire to the woods, read on.

There was a time when fire was a common and natural occurrence. Frequently, especially in the summer months when weather can be severe, lightning would strike a pine tree, shrub or grasses and start a raging flame throughout the forests. The fire would burn for miles until it met up with a natural fire break such as a lake, swamp or hardwood hammock. Once the blazes met up with the wetter areas, they would go out.

Many plant communities are fire dependent, which means they need fire to survive. The pine flatwood community is one of these areas. Pines need the sun. When hardwood trees, such as oaks begin to grow in these areas, they shade out the sun-loving pines, which cannot reproduce without an open area and lots of sunshine. Without fire, eventually the pine forest will become a hammock. You may be asking, why is this so bad? The pine flatwood community supports thousands of species of flora and fauna that cannot survive anywhere else. If all their sources of food, shelter and type of community are no longer available, they will perish.

With this in mind, it is easy to understand why fire is still important to our remaining natural areas. However, with hospitals, residences, schools, roads and other human inhabited structures all around, fire is not a very welcome visitor. That is why mankind must occasionally step in and lend Mother Nature a helping hand.

Prescribed burning is a tool used by many environmental agencies as well as the agricultural industry to keep the land healthy. It is an important part of today's land management practices. The prescription burns are done for many reasons. Fire stops the succession process, which is when one plant community overtakes another. The health and resilience of many plant species depend on the fire and the nutrients the burning provides to the soil. It permits new growth of many species, especially wildflowers. A variety of wildlife species are attracted to lower lying vegetation, which is provided after a burn.

Perhaps one of the most important reasons to burn on a regular basis is for safety. When certain plant communities are not burnt for many years, fuels build up on the forest floor. Pine needles, dead branches, leaves and vegetation are very attractive to wildfires. Keeping these fuels to a minimum seriously reduces the possibility of wildfire, keeping nearby residences and other structures out of harm's way.

Now hopefully you understand why fire is important as a tool. Prescribed burns are very carefully written prescriptions for a specific area that requires fire to survive. Many factors such as weather, ground moisture, wind speed and direction, and humidity are calculated into the prescription. If any of these factors are not ideal, the burn does not happen that day.

The Sun 'n Lake Preserve is a 1,350 acre site located at the end of Sun 'n Lakes Blvd. It consists of a complex mosaic of natural communities. Pine flatwoods dominate the property which is also scattered with mesic flatwoods, swamps, marshes, bayheads and scrubby flatwoods. Preservation of this area is critical for many species of plants and animals such as the black bear and bald eagle.

Burn conditions were excellent on Wednesday. The goals of the burn were biological benefits and fuel reduction. Thanks to all of those brave burners who battled the heat, exhaustion and elements to keep our natural areas healthy, the burn was extremely successful. No one was harmed and the forest is now much healthier.

Very soon, the new growth will begin to emerge from the ashes. Animals will come to forage in the wide open spaces where food is readily available. Wildflowers will begin to pop up all over giving the forest floor a burst of color. As it was in the past, the plant communities that were touched by fire will thrive, rejuvenate, and regenerate.