

Little Pine Island comes back

Mitigation banks restore area; native animal, plant life returns

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Shades of vibrant green and brown hues that Crayola could never replicate paint the terrain of Little Pine Island. Majestic great white egrets wade through the marshes searching for leopard frogs and sailfin Molly fish.



Only nine years ago Little Pine Island was a dense forest of invasive exotics such as melaleucas, Australian pines and Brazilian peppers. It was practically impossible to walk on the island without a machete and a supply of bug spray. Now the island is enjoyed by hikers and nature lovers who can walk through a native wetland, seeing native plants and animals.

Little Pine Island is close to being restored to its natural glory, full of salt water, fresh water and brackish marshes home to hundreds of native animals and plants.

"It is amazing," said Richard Anderson of Mariner Properties. "This is why I do what I do."

In 1996, Mariner Properties entered a private-public partnership with the state of Florida to restore about 1,600 of the island's 4,700 acres, of which about 3,100 acres are protected mangroves. The state of Florida established mitigation banks in 1990. The law was made to create a regional, master-planned approach to wetland restoration and management.

The Little Pine Island Restoration and Mitigation Bank was created in 1994, when Mariner Properties nominated the property to become its mitigation project.

The bank works to restore an area to its native habitat. In the case of Little Pine Island, about 1,600 acres were damaged in the 1960s when ditches were dug to drain standing water, a breeding ground for mosquitoes. The water drained out and the exotics moved in. The native wetland animal and plant life all but disappeared.

Little Pine Island's mitigation bank is working to remove 99 percent of the exotics, fill in the mosquito ditching and maintain the area. About 40 to 50 tons of exotic debris have been removed per acre.

Anderson said that about a quarter of the 1,600-acre habitat remains to be restored, but that is only the beginning.

"Maintenance is the key to the whole thing," he said. "Once we remove the exotics, they tend to come back. It is about going back to help the native vegetation out-compete the melaleuca."

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Mariner Properties is taking the natural approach to restoring Little Pine Island. No heavy equipment is used and nothing but the human hand touches the plants and trees.

Exotic trees are hand-cut to the ground and immediately treated with a low-grade herbicide. Mats and temporary roads are laid to prevent the disruption of the soil as trucks are brought in to remove debris.

In the course of 10 years, more than \$12 million dollars will be spent on Little Pine Island's restoration, with not one penny of public money.

So where does the money come from?

When a developer in Lee County finds it is going to impact a coastal wetland or destroy it, it can buy credits at Little Pine Island's Mitigation Bank. Credits cost from \$35,000 to \$40,000. One wetland mitigation credit is equal to the value of 1 acre of wetland creation.

About 5 percent of every mitigation dollar is put into the Little Pine Island Preservation Trust Fund. The interest generated from the trust will pay for maintenance of the preserve.

When the project is complete, three organizations must sign off on it: Florida's Department of Environmental Protection, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Florida's park service.

Barbara Dubin, 69, of Bokeelia has watched the restoration of Little Pine Island from the beginning. Having it in her own backyard is one of the reasons she loves living on Pine Island.

"This is what the community is about," she said. "If we all wanted to live in a place like Fort Myers Beach, we would have moved there. It adds to the old Florida feel and, heaven help us, we want to keep it this way."

Besides bringing in more hikers, Little Pine Island could play host to migratory birds when they begin flocking to the area next month. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission recently added the island to the South Florida Section of the Great Florida Birding Trail.

Wildlife ecologist Kris Bowman monitors wildlife on Little Pine Island and says that when wildlife returns in large numbers it means the restoration work is a success. He said it is about creating a food web to sustain life.

"When they opened it up," he said, "those native plants started growing back and a lot of wading birds started using the areas puddled with water to forage for fish and frogs and snakes."