

Putting Florida Prairies in the Limelight

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If you ask ten people who came out of Publix where they would go to see a prairie, how many of them would say Florida? While midwestern prairies have gained popularity, Florida prairies remain obscure. You hear references to prairies in literature, television, theater, and movies. But how many people associate them with Florida?

So what? Does it really matter if a thirdgrader in St. Petersburg knows we have prairies in Florida? What does fame have to do with managing our Florida prairies? Politicians think fame is important enough to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to make their names and faces recognizable to as many people as they can reach. They know that if their name sounds familiar, voters will vote for them even if they haven't a clue where they stand on the issue.

Ask the promoters of the Dry Prairie conference how easy it was to get funding to put it all together. Dr. Howard Frank once lamented that while keystone species of Florida's hammocks and forested wetlands were being decimated by an invasive Mexican weevil, he could not get any money to study a potential biological control because no one knew or cared what an epiphyte was. Perhaps it was just a coincidence that after a syndicated article about the suddenly endangered airplants appeared in newspapers throughout the state, funding became available from more than one source.

What effects can fame have on the management of the imperiled dry prairie ecosystem?

- Inspire wider interest in research opportunities
- Increase chances of winning grant proposals
- Funding for research and resource management activities
- Land acquisition
- Political support
- Ability to recruit volunteers and supporters

Ok, so if fame is all that important, how do we make Florida prairies famous?

To start with, I suggest building on the fame of midwestern prairies. If prairies are already a household word, work on making Florida prairies part of the big picture. Notice the name of this paper is Putting Florida prairies in the limelight, not putting Florida dry prairies in the limelight. Stop thinking like a scientist and try to win hearts by making people feel good about prairies. Promote prairies instead of wet prairies or dry prairies. Or even better, promote prairie animals.

I once attended a presentation about the Florida Scrub Jay. Someone in the audience asked the speaker why scrub jays were so important. I was surprised to hear him say, they really aren't any more important than any other bird on earth. What is important is the scrub. It is a unique community and if we lose it we are losing something that will never exist on this earth again. But people

don't care about a hot sandy inhospitable place like a scrub. If you can show them a cute little critter that they can fall in love with, they'll save the scrub to save the critter. It doesn't have to be a scrub jay. It could just as well be a sand skink or a scrub lizard—but scrub jays are a whole lot easier to sell to the public.

Our prairies have some pretty good candidates for prairie mascots—Sandhill Cranes, Grasshopper Sparrows, Caracaras, and Burrowing Owls.

Now that we have some potential stars we are ready to advertise our prairies, but who is going to write the script? I think it is very important to consider whom we choose to design the brochures, promote our natural areas, and write the text for publications. Asking a scientist to write about prairie can be like asking a draftsman to paint a sunset. Scientific writing and popular writing are not the same. But artists don't know anything about our prairies. Look how difficult it was to find photographers to submit pictures of Florida prairies for this conference.

We have to inspire the artists. Let's consider some potential mediums for getting prairies in the public eye.

- Writers of novels
- Authors of children's books
- Writers of magazine articles
- Landscape artists
- Photographers
- Television producers
- Movie producers and scriptwriters

Here is an example: The theme of the exhibits in the visitor center at Myakka River State Park is natural communities. The displays were designed in the early 1970s, and I doubt if park personnel had ever even heard of Florida dry prairie. I wanted to add some type of exhibit to highlight Myakka's prairies but I had little space to work with. I saw an art exhibit at a nature center featuring Florida artist Harry McVay. Harry painted magnificent, realistic pine flatwoods landscapes. I could identify every wildflower to species. But when I asked him to paint a prairie mural for our visitor center, he could not begin to visualize what I wanted. Since many of Myakka's prairies are long fire-excluded, I could not even take him to a specific place that I wanted him to paint. So I spent days taking him by ATV cross-country through our prairies. I took him to Audubon Kissimmee Prairie and I showed him photographs of flowers that bloom in the fall. I asked him to envision Myakka's prairies in pristine condition prior to fire exclusion. The time I spent with Harry was well worth it, as is proved by the fantastic mural he painted for the visitor center and the resulting prairie posters now sold by organizations that promote Florida's prairies.

Another suggestion I have for getting people to love prairies is don't bring them to the prairie in the hot sum-

mer. Or even better don't bring people at all. Teach them to love prairie from afar. Use scrub and wetlands as example. Very few people have taken a guided wade through a wetland, but they still support wetlands conservation legislation. People seldom want to spend time in a scrub or even take the effort and expense to visit a tropical rainforest. But they will support conservation efforts for both communities. If you are going to take people to the prairie, take them out when the wildflowers are in

bloom, when the water levels are low, or in the morning or evening when it is cool.

Take time to look at methods of those who have successfully promoted better-known ecosystems such as wetlands, rainforest, and even scrub. Give out color brochures, sell posters, design t-shirts, publish magazine articles, build a web site, call a television producer, and invite a well-known photographer for a personal early morning prairie tour when the wildflowers are in bloom.