

# THE HISTORY OF FAKAHATCHEE STRAND

by Franklin Adams, Friends of Fakahatchee historian

[www.friendsoffakahatchee.org](http://www.friendsoffakahatchee.org)

The Fakahatchee Strand is probably one of the best examples of subtropical, strand swamp in the United States. The Strand harbors one of the largest concentrations and diversity of native orchids in North America and supports numerous rare and endangered animal species. It is also one of the core areas of the current range of the Florida Panther. The Fakahatchee Strand is linked hydrologically to the Everglades system and is particularly important to the estuarine ecosystem of the Ten Thousand Islands area.

In 1913, the Fakahatchee Strand was purchased by the Lee-Tidewater Cypress Company for \$1.4 million, with the intent of logging the cypress. Major logging did not occur, however, until 1944 as a war-time measure and then continued until the early 1950s. The lag time for commencing major logging operations may have been due to the real estate boom of the mid-1920s and the subsequent Depression years. It has been reported that in 1922 an agent for Henry Ford obtained an option to purchase the Strand with the intention of giving it to the state as a park, but the offer did not materialize.



By 1948, the southern 10 miles of the Fakahatchee Strand had been logged when Dan Beard, the superintendent of Everglades National Park, inspected the Strand and recommended it for a National Monument. At the time, approximately one million board feet of cypress per week were being removed from the Strand. It was pointed out that the density of mammalian life found in the Strand was greater

than that of the Everglades National Park, including black bear, Florida panther, mangrove fox squirrel, and a wide diversity of other wildlife. Beard also commented on the picturesque beauty of the area.

While funding and authority to acquire the area did not materialize in the late 1940s, another attempt was made in 1964 under urging of Mel Finn, a Miami attorney and conservationist. However, once again, the effort to preserve the Strand failed. In 1966, the Lee-Tidewater Cypress Company sold the Strand to the Gulf-American Land Company, which later became G.A.C. Properties, Inc. They purchased the property with the intention of marketing the land as a part of Golden Gate Estates. Much of the property was sold in 1¼-acre lots. During this period, three sections of the Strand were donated to Collier County for a park.

In 1972, the Florida legislature passed the Land Conservation Act (Chapter 259, F.S.), which had as its purpose the conservation and protection of environmentally unique and irreplaceable lands. Later that year, Florida voters approved a bond issue of \$240 million which set in motion Florida's first major environmental land acquisition program known as the Environmentally Endangered Lands (EEL) Program. The Program was administered through the Division of Recreation and Parks of the Department of Natural Resources.

Negotiations with GAC began in 1972. GAC attempted to regain possession of lots it had sold and offered to sell its holdings to the State. Negotiations were temporarily halted when GAC was prosecuted for dredge and fill violations at Cape Coral in Lee County. To resolve this litigation, GAC offered to pay for damages by trading land in the Fakahatchee Strand. Settlement of the litigation resulted in approximately 9,523 acres south of US-41 (Tamiami Trail) being acquired.

The first purchase of land creating Fakahatchee Strand State Park, made in June 1974, was the beginning of a continuous acquisition effort which is ongoing to this day. By 1978 approximately 44,000 acres had been acquired. As of January 1, 1999, the Preserve consisted of 69,896 acres. Of this, approximately 34,727 acres were acquired under the EEL Program. As that program came to an end, the acquisition effort was assumed by the Conservation and Recreation Lands (CARL) Program. Under the CARL Program, the project has been expanded to include lands between the older project and SR-29.

All this time, approximately 16,700 acres remains to be acquired. Since 1990, most lands have been acquired with Preservation 2000 funding. Hopefully, this noteworthy acquisition effort will continue with the use of these funds or successive funding until all reasonable efforts to complete the project have been exhausted.

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