

INSIGHT LAGOON



Confused by the many lagoon stories in the Press Journal that focus on Lake Okeechobee and the St. Lucie Estuary? The issues to the south of us often are not the same as the problems impacting "our" stretch of the Indian River Lagoon. To help 32963 readers sort out what we should be concerned about locally and what we can do to help, this page will be devoted each week to lagoon issues here.

Pelican Island Audubon: 50 years of protecting nature

BY STEVEN M. THOMAS
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It was 50 years ago this week that Pelican Island Audubon Society received its charter, but the original members already had environmental protection achievements under their belts before the official scroll arrived.

"It really started in 1961 as a group of citrus growers, sportsmen and other concerned citizens who called themselves the Indian River Preservation Society," says University of Florida Biology Professor Emeritus Richard Baker, who has led PIAS for the past 13 years. "They came together to try and save the lands around Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge, which was scheduled to be developed as a dredge-and-fill housing project, and they eventually were successful."

Florida Audubon had helped the group convince the state to buy and preserve the land, which later became part of the refuge, and instead of disbanding after the battle was won, nine members held a meeting in March 1964 and decided to become an Audubon chapter to continue the work of protecting and preserving the natural environment.

Since then, PIAS has grown into Indian River County's most important environmental activism and education organization, with a highly qualified 18-person board and 967 members ranging in age from 20 to over 90.

"Pelican Island Audubon members are the boots on the ground for conservation in Indian River County," says Eric Draper, executive director of Audubon Florida. "They have been more influential than any other Audubon chapter in the state."

PIAS's list of achievements includes organizing the first coastal clean-up in the United States, helping pass bans on nighttime beach lighting to protect sea turtle hatchlings, and founding the Environmental Learning Center, which has become a major force for conservation and ecology education in its own right. The group was instrumental in passing two bond issues, in 1992 and 2004, which with matching funds raised \$136 million to acquire 35 conservation parcels totaling 9,700 acres in IRC.

It blocked ill-advised county efforts to expand the Oslo Road Boat Ramp, which would have increased boat traffic in one of the few areas in our lagoon where seagrass continues to thrive.

PIAS has published books on Blue Cypress Lake, Indian River County water resources and other topics; launched an innovative school gardening project that helps reconnect children with nature and provides food for needy families; and led the successful effort to get strong fertilizer regulations passed to reduce nitrogen pollution in the lagoon.

"They are important advocates for native wildlife habitat and key partners in educating people about the importance of conservation to the ecology and economy of the county," says Ken Grudens of the Indian River Land Trust.

ORCA founder Edie Widder calls PIAS members "stalwart environmental stewards."

The chapter's latest project is the Audubon House community and education center now under construction adjacent to the University of Florida entomology lab on Oslo Road, in the midst of some 400 acres of lagoon-side conservation land it helped preserve.

The center, with architectural features that evoke a birdhouse, will have a large classroom, a breeze-way that can be used for classes in nice weather, offices, restrooms and a 1,500-volume nature library with a special children's section for quiet reading and story-telling.

There will be live wildlife cameras and microphones hooked up so people can be in touch with nature while inside the building. Area plants will be equipped with QR code signs that, when scanned by smart phones, will open up video presentations about the species.

Audubon will use the classrooms to train volunteers to manage and lead tours on county conservation lands, including the Oslo Riverfront Conservation Area that surrounds it. The building will also be used by UF graduate students and community groups offering a wide range of lectures and other ecology education efforts. There will be guided nature walks and canoe and kayak excursions that explore the lagoon and its tributaries. A model native plant landscape and butterfly garden will be developed.

PIAS has applied for an Impact 100 grant to help equip and maximize the educational potential of the facility, which will open next fall. "The center will be a key piece in our community demonstrating how people and nature can live together," says Baker.

Pelican Island Audubon has won the "Best Chapter of the Year" award from Audubon Florida three times in the past seven years. "Pelican Island is the very best of the Audubon network," says Draper. "They are engaged on all levels as conservation advocates and educators and citizen scientists." ■