

Meadow, No Lark

Written by Blanca Mesa, BT Contributor
March 2017

Community resolve will push sustainability for Miami

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hen we talk about sustainable South Florida, we talk about redesigning buildings to conserve energy or withstand floodwaters. We marvel at elevated roadways and powerful pumps. Yet we should also be embracing the natural areas that renourish themselves, free of pesticides or fertilizers.

There's a meadow off Old Cutler Road and SW 184th Street that does just that. On a recent Sunday morning, volunteers were there planting coontie, saw palmetto, quailberry, pineland grasses, and Dade County pine, weaving together an ecosystem that will someday be self-sufficient and resilient. The buzz and flutter of bees and butterflies already make the land hum.

This Coastal Wetlands Restoration site in Cutler Bay is still just a sliver of a 150-acre Biscayne Bay Coastal Wetlands (BBCW) restoration project. The land was purchased for \$24.5 million in 2010 by the South Florida Water Management District as part of the broader Everglades restoration.

Once fully restored, the area will revert to the native habitat that once covered the area before settlers wound their way south to farm or fish or plat housing developments.

Eventually the land will grow into coastal pine rockland, hardwood hammock, and coastal

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wetlands. On the eastern border, the saltwater marshes and coastal wetlands will be stripped of exotics and restored. To the west, on a contiguous swath that lines Old Cutler Road, a nine-acre plot could become pine rockland once again, one of the world's most endangered habitats. That land is now in private hands and slated for a housing subdivision. Community activists are urging Miami-Dade County's Environmentally Endangered Lands Program to purchase it.

"This is about sustainability. And that's not just about humans," says Eduardo Varona, a regulatory biologist whose day job tends toward combating invasive species like the giant African snail.

A few years ago, he took on this meadow restoration as a volunteer and has been corralling others to join in, too. First, exotics like Burma weed and Brazilian pepper were bulldozed and mulched on site, creating a vast layer of pulverized roots, with the occasional strip of plastic wrapper, a remnant perhaps of the land's use as an illegal dumping ground. Varona has designed paths that will weave through future woodland habitat and reintroduced the plants that will someday bring back native wildlife to the area. A popular Facebook page, Liveablecutler, documents the progress.

With volunteers turning out on weekends, almost two acres of degraded lands have been replanted with natives. The work is slow and painstaking, involving digging holes by hand in the rocky soil under the brutally hot sun, then waiting for the newly planted natives to take root and flourish.

It will take many years to restore, but the volunteers seem more in tune with the old Greek proverb: "A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in."

Much like the remnant forests left standing in places like Simpson Park near Brickell, Virginia Key off the coast of Miami, and the Deering Estate on Biscayne Bay, these restored lands play an important role in preserving biodiversity and tying current generations to the past and the future. Without understanding or appreciating those ties, we are less likely to care about preserving biodiversity for future generations of humans, as well as wildlife.

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In the disconnected urban environment of Miami, natural landscapes like this also remind us of the interconnectedness of all life on Earth. This concept was first articulated by the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), whose greatest contribution to modern environmentalism was the concept of a web of life, and with it, an awareness of the vulnerability of all living things.

“We’re part of nature. Whether we know it or acknowledge it, it doesn’t make a difference,” says Varona. “When we degrade our ecosystems, we degrade ourselves.”

Somewhere between the planting and experience of being in a natural landscape are the true lessons of resiliency.

Varona hopes the army of volunteers will translate to visits to local commission chambers, where elected officials are making decisions, like whether to buy the adjacent nine-acre parcel for a pineland park, instead of letting it become another subdivision.

“Projects like this get people engaged, literally, at the grassroots level,” he adds.

The goal is not just to restore this land, but to imbue political decisions with concerns for sustainability. This is especially important for Miami, which is facing myriad challenges, from freshwater shortages to flooding and pollution. Population pressures have pushed the city far past sustainable levels.

Environmental protection may have hit a full stop with the election of a president who claims to be a climate change denier and promises to eliminate regulations on clean air and clean water. It will now be up to local communities, which are already experiencing the impact of a super-heated world, to enact policies and practices that assure sustainability and survival.

And it could begin with this restored meadow.

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