



Alafia River Complex

Each of the three major rivers in the Tampa Bay Region has its own unique personality. The Alafia is defined by the higher elevation of its upper watershed, resulting in a well-defined floodplain that ends abruptly as the land rises to drier uplands. For most of its length, the river flows between sandy banks from 8 to 12 feet high. The Alafia River starts its life as two separate river systems, both with headwaters in Polk County. The North Prong is unique among rivers of the region due to its yellow-green color, which indicates the presence of suspended clay, and the lack of tannin, an organic compound found in plants that leaches into surface waters and results in the more familiar dark brown color of most rivers and streams in Florida. The South Prong does have this characteristic dark brown color, and when the two branches meet at Alderman's Ford Park in Hillsborough County, the two streams can be seen flowing side by side for some distance, before mixing together. One possible explanation for the obvious difference in the appearance of the two streams is that in the upper watershed of the North Prong, phosphate ore processing is a significant land use, while in the upper South Prong, the actual phosphate mining takes place. Each activity has its own impact on the river, with the processing having a more profound impact on the character of the water. From this point on, the river is brown, and becomes progressively darker in color as more tributaries flow into it along the way to Tampa Bay.

The Alafia River has a reputation for being a polluted river system, suffering from the impacts of phosphate mining in the Polk County headwaters. While this may be true, and a devastating episode in 1997 (Mullberry Phosphate Company) literally wiped out much of the life in the river from the North Prong headwaters down to the Hwy 41 bridge, this river system is unique and fascinating in many ways. In some ways, it is actually in better condition than the Hillsborough River. First of all, there is no dam on the Alafia, which means that the river provides an uninterrupted system for its entire length, from Tampa Bay to the highlands of Polk County. Fish such as snook, mullet, and sheepshead, and other animals as varied as blue crabs and manatee, are free to venture as far upstream as their instincts compel them. It is not unusual to see large snook as far upstream as Alderman's Ford Park. For this reason, the river should be considered significant for the habitat it provides for species that require both fresh and salt water during different parts of their life cycle.

Many tributaries comprise the Alafia River system. As stated earlier, the river itself is split in two for the majority of its length. The north and south "prongs" of the Alafia join together at Alderman's Ford Park, just east of Hwy 39. Significant tributaries include Turkey Creek, Fish Hawk Creek, English Creek, Buckhorn Creek, Rice Creek, Bell Creek, and Lithia Springs. Most of these creeks also form the connecting threads for natural habitat corridors, providing an interconnecting system of uplands and wetlands that are capable of supporting a diverse array of native plants and animals in a rapidly developing region.

The lands that have been purchased for permanent preservation within the Alafia River complex total approximately 16,000 acres in area. Taking into consideration the additional preserve areas that are being treated separately in this guide as scrub sites, the total amount of land that can be considered as part of an interconnected system is approximately 23,000 acres. In addition to providing critical natural habitat, these lands also play a vital role in flood prevention, public water supply, and outdoor recreation. Among the wildlife resources are wading bird nesting colonies, large colonies of gopher tortoises, and populations of rare species such as the Eastern indigo snake, short-tailed snake, and Florida sandhill crane. Many of the individual park and preserve sites contain trail networks up to ten miles in length, but perhaps the most exciting aspect of the existing and proposed preserve lands is the potential to create linkages between the sites, with the ultimate goal of a circular trail system of well over 30 miles in length.