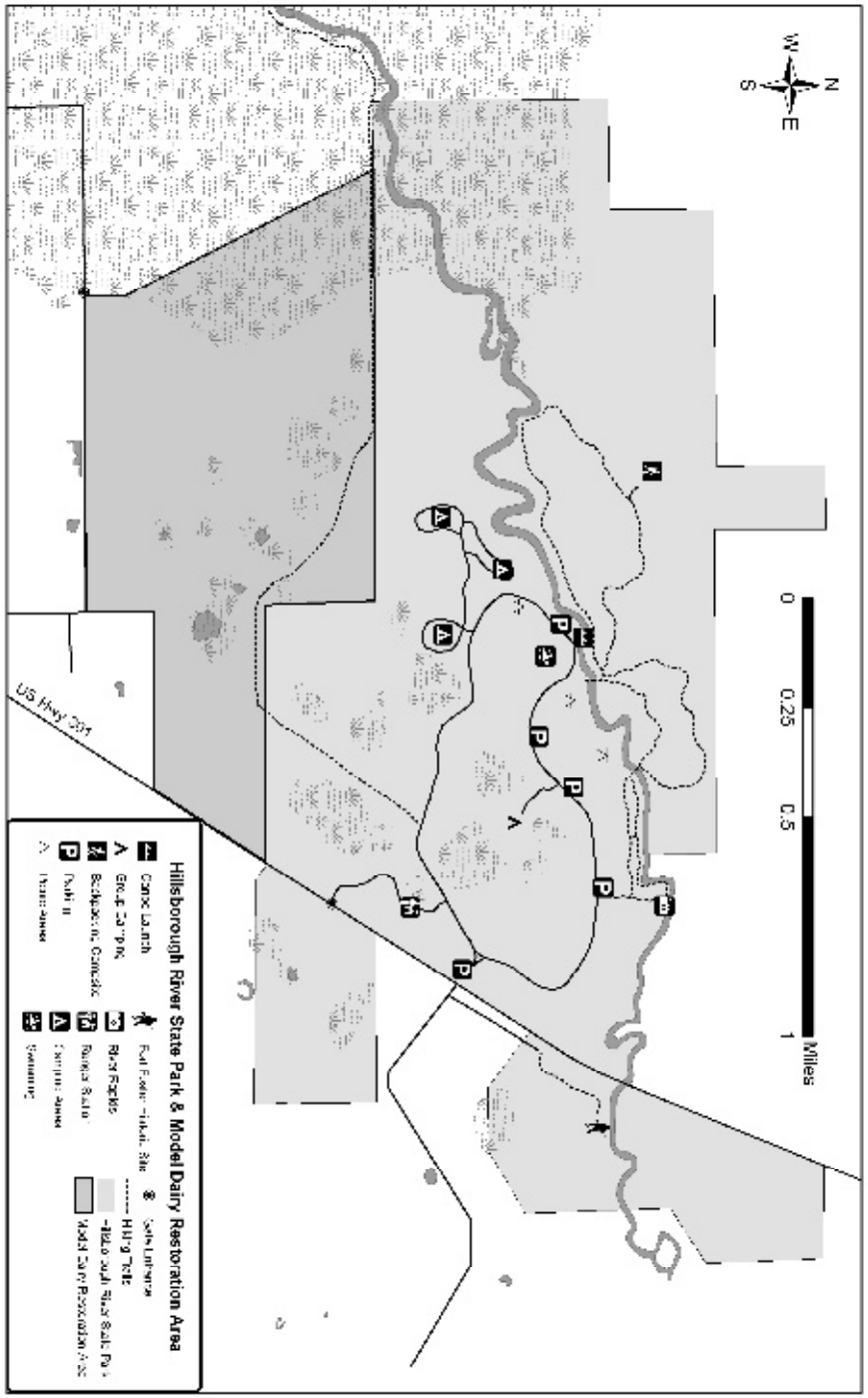
Hillsborough River State Park/Model Dairy Restoration Area

General Description
Size: Hillsborough River State Park = 3,412 acres, Model Dairy Restoration Area = 372 acres. This park is one of the oldest State Parks in Florida. One of several around the State constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps, the park opened to the public in 1938. The park's most famous natural feature is the river rapids, formed by a limestone outcropping. Three separate trails provide access to the natural environment along the river, and a fourth trail connects with the Model Dairy Restoration Area, a separate parcel purchased by Hillsborough County (ELAPP) in 1988 and leased to the State for management.

Location and Access
The park entrance is on the west side of US Hwy 301, 12 miles northeast of Tampa, and 6 miles south of Zephyrhills. The park is open 365 days a year, from 8 am until sundown.

Environmental Significance
The limestone outcroppings, made famous by the river rapids, are part of a formation known as Suwanee Limestone, formed during the Oligocene Epoch, approximately 25 million years ago. It is unusual to find such outcroppings reaching the surface in this region. The park includes large areas of hardwood forest along the river with many ancient trees, especially huge live oak with heavy growths of Spanish moss, resurrection fern, and other epiphytes, including butterfly orchids (*Encyclia tampensis*) a native species with tiny pink blossoms appearing during early summer months. In higher elevations, pine flatwoods and oak hammock are interspersed with cypress dome swamps and freshwater marshes. During the first 30 years of the park's operation, fire suppression had the impact of reducing habitat quality and diversity, and the park's managers have been gradually restoring the flatwoods by manual removal of the hardwoods followed by reintroduction of prescribed fire. Another important habitat management initiative is the removal of invasive non-native plant species such as skunk vine and air potato, which would otherwise overcome and destroy native vegetation. Next to the park on the south boundary, the area known as the Model Dairy was once occupied by a dairy farm, but abandoned years ago. This parcel became the first tract of land purchased by Hillsborough County's Environmental Lands Acquisition and Protection Program (ELAPP). The land was targeted for preservation in order to protect a large area of natural habitat from development, to provide a protective buffer for the State Park, and to enable habitat restoration to occur on the abandoned dairy site. A large scale restoration project was completed by the West Coast Regional Water Supply Authority (now Tampa Bay Water), in the 1990's, and the area once occupied by the abandoned dairy farm is now a beautiful man-made wetland.

Recreational Opportunities
The park offers camping, picnicking, bicycling, hiking, canoeing, fishing and even swimming in a shallow pool. Hikers will find several trail choices. The Hillsborough Hiking Trail, across the river and downstream, is a 3.4 mile trail developed by the Florida Trail Association, and it includes a primitive campsite for backpackers. Paddlers will find the river downstream of the park to be one of the most beautiful and wild stretches of water in the State. This is a State designated canoe trail, and trips can be arranged with Canoe Escape, a local outfitter. The park also features a history museum and reconstructed Seminole Indian War era fort, Fort Foster. Contact the park office for tour schedule information.

Volunteer Opportunities
Opportunities include campground host, clerical work, maintenance and repair, ranger station assistant, interpreter, resource management, trail maintenance and more. Be sure to ask about the special volunteer teams and ranger readiness program offered at this park. Private organizations are involved in some aspects of park support and operations, including developing and maintaining the trail systems.

Contact Information
Hillsborough River State Park, 15402 US Hwy 301 N., Thonotosassa, FL 33592. (813) 987-6771.
Florida Trail Association, 1-877-HIKE-FLA. (www.floridatrail.org).
Canoe Rentals: www.canoeescape.com