

Lettuce Lake County Park/USF Eco-Study Area/Ecopalms

General Description

Size: Park = 240 acres, USF = Approximately 500 acres, Ecopalms = Approximately 1,000 acres. Lettuce Lake Park is a Hillsborough County regional park developed in the early 1980's with a combination of "resource-based" outdoor recreational facilities such as an open playfield, picnic shelters and a paved trail/fitness course, and more nature oriented facilities such as a boardwalk with an observation tower, unpaved nature trails, and a visitor center. The park is extremely popular, and occasionally reaches capacity on busy weekends, but during off-peak times, visitors can find a quiet nature sanctuary with outstanding wildlife viewing opportunities.

Across the river to the west is the USF Ecological Studies Area, with a small recreational area on the river open to students and faculty only. To the north and west is a privately owned conservation area known as Ecopalms. These three parcels are included as part of a single site because they are physically connected and function as a single ecological unit.

Location and Access

The park is located on Fletcher Avenue, 1 mile west of Interstate 75 and 1-1/2 miles east of 56th Street. There is no public access to the USF property or Ecopalms. The river can be accessed for canoeing/kayaking either at Fowler Avenue, approximately 2 miles downstream, or at Wilderness Park/Trout Creek, approximately 2-1/2 miles upstream. Boaters cannot enter Lettuce Lake Park from the river, or vice versa.

Environmental Significance

The park itself includes about a 60/40 mixture of wetlands to uplands, mostly heavily forested. Along the transitional zone between the two lies a highly scenic hardwood hammock area with large live oaks draped with resurrection fern and other epiphytes or "air plants". On higher ground the dominant plant community was once pine flatwoods, but in recent decades, the absence of fire has resulted in natural succession toward an oak hammock community. Small cypress domes are also found as isolated wetlands within the uplands. Across the river to the west, the hardwood swamp forest of the river floodplain gradually gives way to a series of habitat zones as the ground elevation increases. The USF property includes a sizeable amount of extremely rare sandhill habitat. Unlike the adjacent park, the uplands in the USF preserve have been burned on a periodic basis to maintain the health of this critical habitat. The University uses the area for education and scientific research. The area to the north and northwest is known as Ecopalms, and consists almost entirely of wetlands along the river and Cypress Creek. This land was designated as a conservation area as a condition of the Development of Regional Impact permit for the Tampa Palms community.

Recreational Opportunities

At Lettuce Lake, picnicking, bicycling, roller-blading, jogging and nature study/environmental education are available. This site is a very popular birdwatching area. The USF area is open to students and faculty only, and contains a small park on the river with a ballfield, picnic shelters, and canoe/kayak launch. There is no public access to Ecopalms.

Volunteer Opportunities

Contact the park to assist with general park maintenance and upkeep, or to lead guided walks on the trails and boardwalks.

Contact Information

Hillsborough County Parks, Recreation and Conservation Department, 1101 E. Rivercove Drive, Tampa, FL 33604. (813) 975-2160.

