

Little Manatee River Complex

The Little Manatee River enjoys the reputation of being the cleanest, least altered of the river systems in the Tampa Bay watershed. It has never been subjected to major dredging at its mouth for shipping, has never been dammed and remains unchannelized. The entire river is designated as an Outstanding Florida Water, and the portion below the Hwy 301 bridge is an aquatic preserve. The primary impacts to this river come from agriculture and phosphate mining. Residential development in the lower watershed is on the horizon, but significant portions have been purchased for preservation by State, Water Management District and County programs. In the future, large areas within the watershed will probably be transformed from agriculture to residential land use, and a vast tract of land in the upper watershed has been approved for phosphate mining. The mining is scheduled to occur over a period of several decades, but once completed, much of the land will be reclaimed as natural habitat and set aside for permanent preservation. In all likelihood, the Little Manatee River will remain in its current condition for the foreseeable future.

Presently, the total acreage of protected land along the river corridor is approximately 8,000 acres. Many more acres will eventually be added through the mining process, and additional lands are targeted for acquisition in Manatee County along the South Fork, a major tributary. In addition to protecting the river itself from the impacts of development, these lands provide vast amounts of high quality natural habitat that supports a wide variety of native plants and wildlife. Many of the species known to exist here are rare, including the West Indian Manatee, southern bald eagle, Florida scrub jay, burrowing owl, eastern indigo snake, Florida golden aster, and thousands of gopher tortoises, along with the host of species that inhabit the burrows of these unique reptiles.

Native plants and animals are not the only beneficiaries of these protected lands. People also enjoy many direct benefits, including flood prevention, improved water quality, climate moderation, and outdoor recreation. The parks and preserves featured in this booklet provide outstanding opportunities for camping, fishing, hiking, canoeing, horseback riding and much more. Public ownership does not guarantee that these areas are protected from harm. In addition to active management to maintain the long term health of the natural resources, these lands need your help to prevent harmful impacts of future development, including the threat of new transportation corridors and high density development that, if not properly planned and located, can have a devastating impact on natural areas.

