

Community Concern About Continuing Loss of Pine Rocklands in the Richmond Tract Formerly Home to More Than 350 Native Plant Species

DELRAY BEACH, Florida—The Institute for Regional Conservation (IRC) Chief Conservation Strategist, George Gann, recently sat down with IRC's floristic database to gain an understanding of the plant biodiversity in the Richmond Tract. What he found was that within this relatively small area of land, more than 350 species of native plants have been recorded, about one quarter of all the native plant species historically found in South Florida. The list contains everything from common species, such as our Florida state tree (the cabbage palm), to several federally listed endemic plants, to extremely rare tropical and temperate species at the ends of their global ranges. Several of these plants are found in Miami-Dade County and nowhere else in the world.

“There has been a lot of recent concern in the community about the continuing loss of pine rocklands outside of Everglades National Park, and in the Richmond Tract in particular,” said Gann. “And the basis for much of that concern is obvious. Any additional loss of pine rocklands is tragic, especially on public lands. We are down to the last little bits and every remaining bit matters. But the devil is in the details, and we need an updated floristic analysis of the Richmond Tract if we are really going to understand what is at stake for plant conservation.”

The commonly dubbed Richmond Tract comprises a patchwork of ownership by different entities, including the U.S. Coast Guard, Zoo Miami, and the University of Miami. While most of the concern has been on the remaining pine rocklands, former wetlands running through the site contribute to its remarkable diversity. After the protected Deering Estate at Cutler (which has more than 500 native plant species), the Richmond Tract is the most important native plant resource in Miami-Dade County outside of Everglades National Park. It historically had more native plant species, for instance, than Biscayne National Park.

“What we need to do now is to demonstrate that all the remaining undeveloped parcels at Richmond are important, and to promote the active restoration of pine rocklands in the so-called scraped areas, which have been cleared of pine trees and mowed,” Gann continued.

According to Gann, “Several areas in Richmond that others have thrown in the mental trash heap and are therefore available for development may in fact be critical habitat for native plants. It's unfortunate, in a way, that we named this globally imperiled ecosystem ‘pine rocklands’ since the pine tree is just the most obvious component. The loss of pine trees does not mean the ecosystem is destroyed. Perhaps it would have been better if we had named it ‘limestone savanna’ or something, so that people associated more with the herbaceous understory and not pine trees. This is where the rare biodiversity is located.”

One important thing we need to know now is how many native plant species are still present in the Richmond Tract. While some parts of Richmond have been conserved and are well managed, the overall trend over the last 30 years has been lack of management, continued fragmentation and the incremental loss of species.

“From reviewing the floristic data, we now know that many native species were recorded in only one or two tracts within Richmond. Unfortunately, some of these species may now be gone.

The idea that all the native plants at Richmond can be protected in Larry and Penny Thompson Park and small protected areas at the Zoo is false. Larger areas are needed,” continued Gann.

The last extensive floristic inventories of Richmond were conducted by IRC more than a decade ago, and some species have not been seen since the early 1990s. Gann concluded, “We need updated information so that we can understand exactly what will be lost if more areas are developed or if critical management, such as prescribed burning and exotic species control, is not implemented.”

For the original release please visit the IRC website at <http://regionalconservation.org/ircs/news.asp>.