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# Parks of Pinellas: A Reflection

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# Parks of Pinellas: A Reflection

By

Ryan Ballogg

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of the  
University Honors Program  
University of South Florida, St. Petersburg

April 30, 2014

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Associate Professor, College of Arts and Sciences

University Honors Program  
University of South Florida  
St. Petersburg, Florida

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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Honors Thesis

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This is to certify that the Honors Thesis of  
Ryan Ballogg  
has been approved by the Examining Committee  
on April 30, 2014  
as satisfying the thesis requirement  
of the University Honors Program

Examining Committee:

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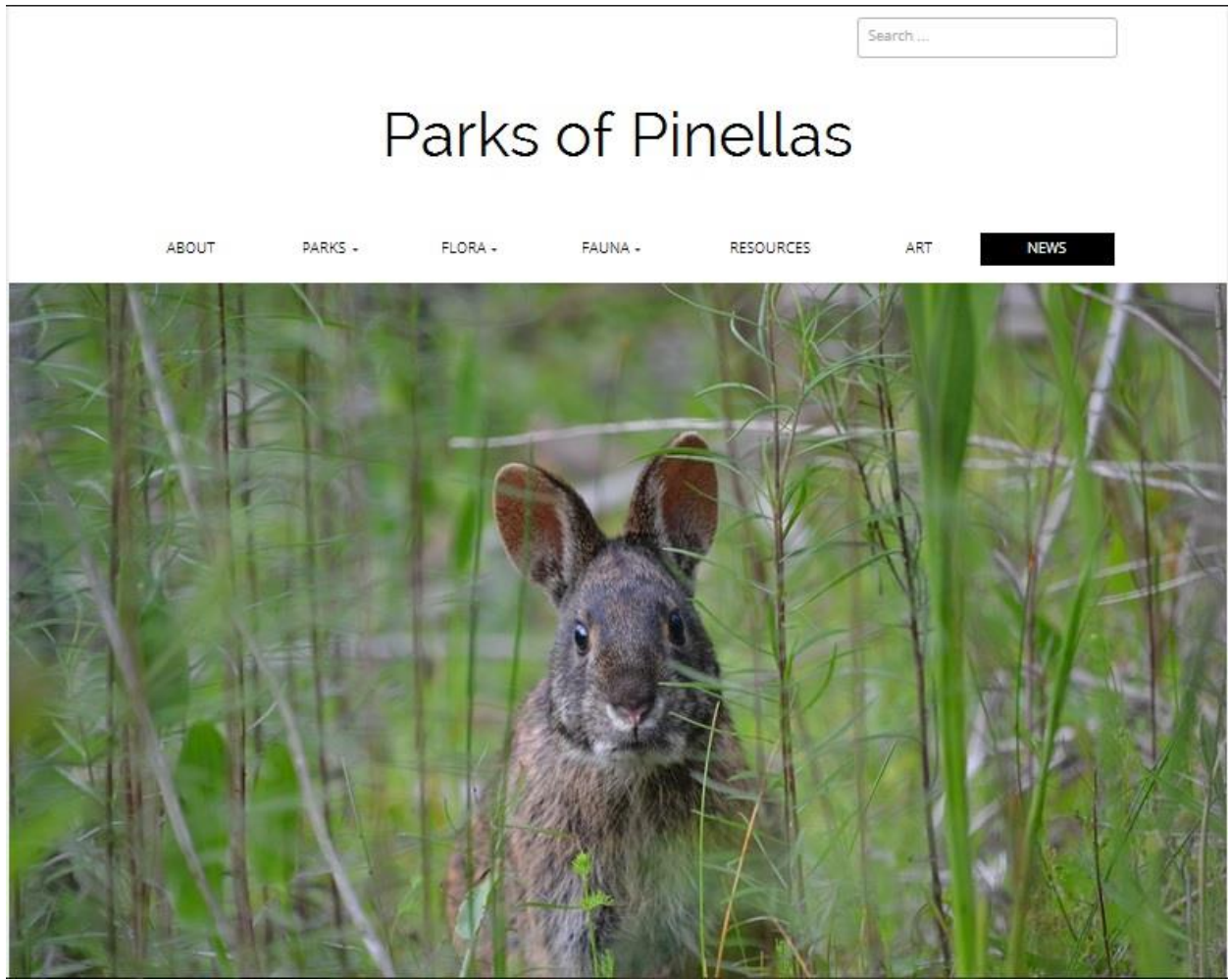
Thesis Director: Christopher Meindl, Ph.D.  
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The website discussed in this reflection paper can be found online at:

[www.parksofpinellas.com](http://www.parksofpinellas.com)



## Part One: Inspirations

*“We need the tonic of wildness...At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be indefinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of nature.”*

– Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

As I sift through the pages of *Walden* once more, I walk in a wilderness and wildness that is no longer available to me, or to most of the people that I know. Where once there were great expanses of unblemished land that sustained themselves and kept their own secrets, now very little remains. Since Thoreau’s time, we have been forced into a new way of thinking about nature. Thoreau and his contemporaries were able to use pure and untouched nature as a place to escape to, think, and shape their philosophies. We cannot do that in very many places today. In fact, in many places, there is no “getting away and escaping into nature” anymore. Perhaps part of the problem is that our view of nature is always so selfish and subjective. Even the transcendentalists, who loved, enjoyed and promoted nature so fervently, did so because they derived happiness from it and were able to use it as a model for their new form of idealism.

Because of the rarity that we have turned truly natural areas into in our towns, counties, and states, we can no longer simply enjoy and muse over nature. Now, we have no choice but to learn everything we can about it if we want any chance at preventing further damage and reversing some of what we have done to unbalance it. People forget that while we can go into and out of nature, nature can’t get away from us, and must endure all the harm we are doing to it. In Pinellas County, where the people stand thicker than trees, it might just be impossible to

completely escape civilization, and the human impact, anymore. Everywhere there are car horns. Everywhere there is trash. Everywhere there are signs of pollution, from the soil to the night sky.

Still, there are a few places where these impacts are felt just a little bit softer, a little bit less. They are the parks. These little swathes and patches of land are the last resemblance of natural territory that we have in Pinellas, and the story is the same in many other places. Though they aren't unaltered or completely whole, they still offer refuge to remaining wildlife in areas that are heavily populated, and a place of escape and contemplation for people.

A good question to start with regarding these spaces is "why?" Why should we care, why should we save or treasure these parks and the fading nature that they represent? The obvious answer would be because they provide us with so much. As far as nature's benefits to us, they are manifold and practically endless. From inspiration and recreation to sustenance, air quality, material goods and a long list of economic benefits, it is worth it for us to keep green spaces around. But I would again argue that is the selfish and secondary answer. I would argue first that we should value nature for nature's sake. Though environmentalists rarely win disputes with developers using this "intrinsic value" argument, it is still worth considering and passing on. If the mentality of society towards natural areas can change, it might make a difference for the future of these places. People take for granted the the right to be born, breathe, and live out their natural time on earth, but it seems they rarely consider that every other living thing might have the same right. Why is it for a human being to decide how the whole earth is divided and shaped for every creature that lives on it? This notion seems to be subconscious and rooted in people's ideas of their own superiority. People assume that because they are supposedly the life form of highest intelligence on Earth, they must also be the most important. But, in this vein of thought, if we are the best of the living things, why has our impact been the worst of any of them? It was

these kinds of thoughts and worries that festered in my mind for several years before this chance to address them in this very small way arrived.

The ideas that inspired me to undertake this project had a long and roundabout way of forming. I have always enjoyed spending time outdoors. When we were kids, my brother and I took a Saturday morning hike with our father every couple months at Moccasin Lake Park, a small nature preserve in Clearwater where my dad worked in his early 20s. Since I was two, my family has traveled to North Carolina for a couple weeks every summer to spend time in the Smoky Mountains. The scenery there was and is breathtaking, and it is still my favorite place to be. Funnily enough though, I had never taken the time to explore the many natural areas we have right here in Pinellas until a couple years ago. Many of them turned out to be truly amazing in their own right.

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It all started with the opening of Eagle Lake Park – the most recent addition to the Pinellas County parks. Right smack in the middle of the square made up by Keene Road and Lake Avenue on the east and west, and Bellair Road and Rosery Avenue on the north and south in Largo, the park spans 163 acres. I had passed by the gated-off property many times in my youth. Old barn-like structures and remnants of citrus groves were visible through the fence. There were rumors in the paper, and from my grandparents (who had social connections with some of the members of one of the pioneer families of Pinellas that still lived there), that the county had bought it and it would soon become a park. Then finally in 2010, it opened. I instantly started spending a lot of my time there. For the most part I didn't really pay attention to

the plants and animals there, or even know the first thing about them. They were just part of the scenery.

A few years later in the spring semester of 2013, my girlfriend took a field biology class at St. Petersburg College. Her class traveled from park to park every week, exploring and learning about Florida's ecosystems and taking field tests on identifying various species. I often drove her to the classes, and so started seeing a lot more of the parks of Pinellas. After her classes, as we walked around the parks, she would point out the various plants and animals to me and tell me what they were and the significance some of them had to their communities. I became very interested in the subject. Around the same time, I got a Nikon DSLR (digital single lens reflex) camera to use for the school newspaper, and I also started using it when we were out at the parks. Eventually, we started collecting photos of every plant and animal that we could. It made us really start paying attention to what actual species we were encountering in the parks. It struck me that I really didn't know what was in our own county, and some of it was pretty amazing. Eventually, we thought about starting a website or blog to document all of the plants and animals we saw, but we never got around to doing it. The Honors thesis presented the perfect opportunity to do so.

Another big inspiration that greatly expanded my original intentions for the project was a professor that I had the privilege to learn from for a very short time - Dr. Robert Dardenne. Dr. Dardenne had visions of changing journalism from a stale monologue, where a news outlet tells people which things are important and why they should care about them, to a conversation, where journalists create a forum for community discussion, an outlet for minority voices and issues to be heard, and stories with less bias. I still haven't read his book on the subject, *The Conversation of Journalism*, but I got a lot of it from him and other professors who had learned



from him firsthand in the classroom. In a humble way, I hope that this project can create such an environment for the subject that I am addressing – a place where people who care about something can be actively involved in discussing it and shaping how it is covered.

## Part Two: Actualization

At first, I wasn't sure how to put all my lofty ideas into effect in a practical way. I was facing an issue of separation. Parks are on the physical plane. However, most people, and especially my generation, are spending the bulk of their time on the digital plane. I knew that I wanted to reach people where they were and make it convenient for them – so that meant the Internet. I started to think of ways that I could present the parks on a website, in a language that would get people's attention and lure them off the web and outside. I also wanted to go about it in a way that gave people a purpose to go to the parks. In other words, I didn't want the website to be so comprehensive that it made it pointless to actually visit a park in person.

Eventually I narrowed my ideas down to a handful of sections for the website. They are as follows:

- Parks: This category is divided into county parks, city parks, and bike trails, and provides a detailed page for each individual subject. A typical page includes a text description, a “by-the-numbers” box with stats about the park, photos and video. Eventually it will also include maps and links to all of the news stories relating to that park. I decided that I would focus most heavily on parks that had some ecological, environmental and historical value.

- Flora: This category is divided into an index of species, endangered species, invasive species and useful and edible species. In the index, plants are broken down into groups such as common upland trees, common wetland trees, and common ferns and mosses.
- Fauna: This category is divided into an index of species, endangered species and invasive species. In the index, animals are broken down into groups such as mammals, reptiles and birds.
- Resources: This page currently lists books on environmentalism, nature, outdoor recreation and generally relating to the subject matter of the website. Eventually it will also include links to environmental news sources, videos on related subjects and other forms of media.
- Art: This section will feature user-submitted art inspired by the parks. Any medium that can be posted on the website will be accepted, from poems to paintings to music.
- News: This section features a newsfeed on the parks of Pinellas County. Content will range from hard news to feature stories to special content.

## Screenshots:

### County Parks Index Page:

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#### County Parks

The parks and preserves below are owned and managed by Pinellas County.

#### Brooker Creek Nature Preserve



Brooker Creek is the largest land preserve in Pinellas County. It offers the longest hiking trails and the most unblemished habitat you can find. A narrow road runs from the entrance to the park on Keystone Road to a small parking lot, and then loops back towards the exit – the bulk of the park is only accessible on foot....

#### Eagle Lake Park



Opened to the public in 2010, Eagle Lake Park is the newest addition to Pinellas County parks. The county bought the land in two segments from the Taylor family, whose ancestors were homesteaders and once used it to grow citrus and raise cattle. There are still remnants of the old citrus groves scattered throughout the park. The park includes large...

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## Single Park Page (Eagle Lake Park):



### Eagle Lake Park

Opened to the public in 2010, Eagle Lake Park is the newest addition to Pinellas County parks. The county bought the land in two segments from the Taylor family, whose ancestors were homesteaders and once used it to grow citrus and raise cattle. There are still remnants of the old citrus groves scattered throughout the park.

The park includes large stands of longleaf pine, which was once prosperous throughout Pinellas County. Boardwalk carries visitors over restored wetland areas that attract a large variety of wading birds and turtles.

At one time, bald eagles nested in a tall pine at the northeast corner of the park. Today the nest is occupied by osprey, but the namesake remains.

#### Habitats Found Here

- Oak Hammock
- Pine Flatwoods

#### By the Numbers

- Acres: 163
- Shelters: 6
- Trails: 43

A virtual tour of the park:



Photo Gallery:



## Flora Index Page (Index of Common Upland Trees):

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### Common Upland Trees

The upland trees of Pinellas County are adapted to mesic to xeric (some moisture to very dry) soil conditions. Because of the xeric conditions in most parts of the county, upland tree populations are not very diverse, and landscapes are often dominated by oak trees and some types of pine, which have a high tolerance for drought and acidic, sandy soil.

Dahoon Holly (*Ilex cassine*)



Longleaf Pine (*Pinus palustris*)



Red Maple (*Acer rubrum*)



Longleaf pine is one of three species of pine tree native to Pinellas County. It is distinguished by very long needles in clusters of 2 and 3 and large cones. Longleaf is a common feature in high pine and pine flatwoods habitats, where it is often accompanied by an understory of saw palmetto or wiregrass.

Red Mulberry (*Morus rubra*)



Sand Pine (*Pinus clausa*)



Slash Pine (*Pinus elliottii*)



Southern Magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*)

Southern Red Cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*)

Water Oak (*Quercus nigra*)

## Fauna Index Page (Index of Birds):

### Birds

Anhinga (*Anhinga anhinga*)



The anhinga is a waterbird that lives in Florida year-round. They usually sit with wings outstretched in patches of sunlight in order to adjust their body temperature. Their diet consists of small fish, amphibians, shrimp, crayfish, snakes and young alligators. Conservation Status: Least Concern

Black-crowned Night Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*)



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Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*)



Great Egret (*Ardea alba*)



The great egret is a large wading bird also known as the common egret, large egret or great white egret (not to be confused with the great white heron). They are distinguishable from other egrets by their orange beaks and black legs. Conservation Status: Least Concern

Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*)



Laughing Gull (*Leucophaeus atricilla*)




Little Blue Heron (*Egretta caerulea*)

Mourning Dove (*Zenaidura macroura*)

Northern Cardinal (*Cardinalis*)

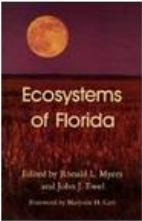
## Resources Page:

Silent Spring  
by Rachel Carson




[Specific to Florida:](#)

Ecosystems of Florida  
by Ronald L. Myers and John J. Ewe



National Audubon Society Field Guide to Florida  
by Peter Alden, Rick Cech, and Gil Nelson



*\*No screenshots are provided for the arts and news pages as they do not contain any substantial content at this time.*

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Before I actually had any content to upload into these sections, there was a great deal of background work to be done. I accomplished as much as I could within the time frame of a little less than a year that I was working on the project, but I fell short of my goals on the amount of content I wanted to gather. I probably should have started out with less ambitious goals, but at least I have created a framework to accomplish them soon.

The content gathering I did finish within the given time frame fell mainly into three categories:

### A. Fieldwork

The most labor intensive part of the project, and the part where I made the most progress, was the actual fieldwork and surveying of the parks.

I visited:

- Boca Ciega Millennium Park: 3 times
- Eagle Lake Park: more than 10 times (this one is right by my house)
- Florida Botanical Gardens, Florida Botanical Gardens Nature Trail: 5 times
- Heritage Village: 3 times
- Sawgrass Lake Park: 3 times
- Brooker Creek Nature Preserve: 2 times
- Boyd Hill Nature Preserve: 4 times
- Moccasin Lake Park: 1 time
- Fort Desoto: 1 time
- Walsingham Park: 3 times
- John Senior Chesnut Park: 1 time
- Lake Seminole Park: 1 time
- Largo Nature Preserve: 1 time
- John S. Taylor Park: 1 time
- Phillipe Park: 3 times
- John R. Bonner Park: 2 times
- George C. McGough Nature Park: 3 times

During these visits, I attempted to walk as much of the park as I could, documenting plants, animals and landscapes with my camera, writing down information from signs, making observations, and talking to people who were willing to talk. An example journal entry is reproduced below:

Journal entry after visiting Eagle Lake Park in Largo on 2-11-14:



*“Today I visited Eagle Lake Park yet again in the long search for the elusive Sherman’s fox squirrel. We have been playing an elaborate game lately where every time I don’t bring my camera to the park, one of them makes an appearance. But if I do have my camera, there is of course no sign of them.*

*That changed today though. Yesterday when I was driving past the park on the way to school I saw one of them near the front entrance, somewhere they weren’t previously frequenting. They seem to change their “headquarters” every so often – before I was seeing them more towards the center of the park.*

*When I got to the park today I headed straight for the front entrance. The area is hilly with well-spaced oak trees, and next to a small warehouse where the County keeps utility trucks. The squirrels don’t seem to be bothered by all of the racket. Sure enough, one of them was basking in the sunlight on one of the oak trunks as if it had been waiting for me all day. However, just as I set up my tripod and got ready to take some pictures, an older gentlemen passed by on a bicycle and just had to stop and ask what I was doing. We proceeded to get into a very long conversation about how journalists cover scientific subjects wrong (he was a scientist). He made some good points and it was an interesting conversation, but all the while I was gritting my teeth and hoping that the fox squirrel was happy enough on its oak tree to hang out for a while longer. He told me about how he had dared himself to bike through every single park in the county one year, and had done it. I told him about my website and asked if he would be willing to let me interview him on the experience. He said yes, we exchanged phone numbers, and then he finally left me alone with the squirrel.*

*The squirrel was very cooperative and let me take as many close-ups as I wanted. I said thanks and left for home, having met two interesting subjects that day.”*

## B. Research

Aside from documenting the parks, plants and animals, I also had to do a great deal of research on them. For the plants and animals, I consulted guidebooks and identification and government websites to obtain specifics about different species, such as how many needles a certain type of pine had or what a certain bird looked like in its juvenile stage. The parks were (and remain) a bit trickier to research, as one of the only resources on them is the Pinellas County website, which is not very comprehensive. Most of the information I was able to obtain came from interviews, a few online sources, and personal observation. I have only just started to look into some of the information archived in newspapers and books, and I am waiting to hear back from the county parks department on what kind of historical records they can give me.

That being said, there is still much research required for many portions of the website. The site is meant to be a work in progress, but I would like to have a little bit more solid background information on the history of the parks before I start publicizing anything.

A large part of the research that I *was* able to complete focused on what the natural areas of Florida used to be like, in hopes of better understand what it is left today. What I found was sad, and also ironic. Most of Florida, including Pinellas County, was once highly dominated by pine communities, and those pine communities were mostly made up of longleaf pine. The beginning of the end for the vast majority of these natural areas started right here in “Pine”-llas (Piney Point, as early Spanish settlers and explorers called the peninsula). Several decades after most of the native people of Pinellas, the Tocobagas, were wiped out by the Spanish, Frenchmen

Odet Phillipe settled in what is now Safety Harbor. He introduced two things to Florida; cigar making, and citrus culture. Citrus agriculture soon took off, and the ideal place for citrus growing just happened to be the sandhills and dry flatlands where longleaf pine was prominent. The pines were clear cut and replaced with citrus over expanses of land.

The next industry to boom in Florida was logging, and longleafs were again the target. Their wood was the best of the pines for the shipping timber, so their population was quickly decimated. Longleaf pines take a long time to grow and mature, though once established they can live to be 400 years old. However, the timber industry didn't have time to wait so they replaced longleafs with faster growing pines like slash and loblolly. This changed the balance of many of Florida's ecosystems forever, and destroyed the possibility of having very many old-growth forests. So where once longleaf pine was dominant, we now see slash pine (this is true in Pinellas) or loblolly (farther north).

Finally, as human development spread, fire was suppressed in pine forests under the assumption that it was destructive and dangerous. However, the opposite is actually true – all major pine ecosystems require fire to prevent succession to oaks and other hardwoods and shrubs, and some even need fire to reproduce. Both high pine and pine flatwoods, where longleaf pine was once dominant, require frequent but mild fires, so they were the most immediately affected by fire suppression. Thus longleaf pine went from being the most common pine in the Southeast to one of the least common.

This is the kind of research I have started to do in order to gain a more comprehensive knowledge of Florida and Pinellas' remaining habitats and how they came to be. It is a work in

progress, but I hope it will eventually add a lot of valuable historical context to the project and make it better known in the community. People should know what was here before them.

### C. Interviews

This being in part a journalism project, interviewing people who are actually involved in the parks is a crucial aspect of the research, and another area where I fell short of my goals. Though I talked to a lot of people casually during my visits to different parks, I only got around to doing a few formal interviews before the project deadline. However, this was solely a time management issue and now that I am graduating I will be able to get a lot more done.

The informal conversations that I had with people were not without benefit. I used them to ask people about what features they would like to see in a resource like the one I was building, and to gauge interest in the site. The feedback was almost all positive, and I got a lot of similar answers. People wanted a source that would actually show them what a park was like and what they would actually see there, as oppose to a lofty or complicated environmental explanation of habitats. Many of my conversations with my thesis director, Dr. Chris Meindl, delved into this issue as well. We debated the correct balance to strike between science and simplicity, and I think we found a good middle ground.

### Part Three: The Process

What seemed like a very simple website creation process became complicated quickly, but turned out making the site much better than I had first imagined it could be within the given time frame. I bought a domain and set up a WordPress.org website and proceeded to choose a simple theme and start uploading content. However, I quickly found that there were some things I just could not make the website do without some amount of custom coding. I consulted the

other member of my thesis committee, Dr. Casey Frechette, and he guided me through a more complicated, but much more useful method of creating the site. We met several times to tackle various problems I was facing in making the website display or act the way I needed it to, and by the end of the semester we set up almost everything the way I wanted it to appear. Without his expertise I would have gotten nowhere near the amount of usability or customization in the final product, and the framework he helped me create will make managing the site much easier going forward.

A large part of the process was creating custom post types in WordPress for subjects like parks, plants, and animals that allowed us to define the way these elements were displayed and how they related to each other. I learned some new coding language and skills and website design concepts as part of the process.

#### Part Four: Problems and Questions

Throughout the process of creating the website, I ran into many road bumps, but a few were particularly challenging to resolve.

One of the first was that I had a difficult time deciding the best way to define the habitats within Pinellas County. The generally accepted system of classification is the Florida Natural Areas Inventory community descriptions. They seem accurate enough, breaking down ecosystems into communities like “high pine,” “mesic hammock,” and “scrub.” However, a Florida ecosystems course that I took this semester shed some light on the way the categories were created. FNAI uses remote sensing to inventory natural areas, basically flying over them in a helicopter with a digital scanner. However, instead of enhancing this method by also putting biologists on the ground, they have used it as a cost-saving measure and stopped doing ground

surveys in most locations. This leads to broad systems of classifications that lump different communities into larger groups, potentially leading to lack a of detailed information and good management plans.

Because of this, I wasn't sure if it would be appropriate to use FNAI's categories or not. After some discussion with Dr. Meindl, I decided that the average person using the website probably wouldn't care about all of the specifics, and it would be better for them to get some kind of general understanding than to be confused by a complicated explanation. However, I will likely write an article on the issue for the newsfeed in the future.

Another problem I faced regarded pursuing possible funding or sponsoring for the site. My original thought was to approach the various parks and recreation departments within the county to ask whether they would be interested in sponsoring the website. However, after my first interview with a parks and recreation director, ethical concerns arose. Some of the information the director gave me clashed with what locals had told me. I realized that if I wanted to create a news outlet that was free and independent of bias or even apparent bias, it would create problems to ask for funding directly from the parks and recreation departments I was reporting on.

#### Part Five: Continuing On

If all goes well, the site will only improve from here. I have lots of ideas for expansion, but I think the key is taking them one by one and implementing them carefully instead of rushing to try to create a mass of content.

Several people have expressed interest in contributing to the site. Some would like to write articles or columns for the newsfeed, and others have offered their services as editors and fact-checkers for the scientific side of the site. My primary goal in the next weeks and is going to be getting the news content flowing in a regular cycle, recruiting writers and editors, and cleaning up and adding to the content on the site.

Eventually, I would like to sustain the website by trying to bring in some kind of revenue. I am still researching various ways in which I could do this. One idea is online advertising, which I could attempt at two levels – both from national outdoors brands and companies, and from local businesses that might want to target naturalists, environmentalists, and the like. Another option that I may consider down the line is making and selling prints of photos from the website. Once users start submitting their own photos of the parks, I could give them the option of allowing me to print and sell their photos. I would give them the option of collecting a small royalty on it or donating it all to maintaining the website and the newsfeed. Successful Youtube channels can also bring in small amounts of revenue. A smart phone application would also be very useful and could have a lot of applications for documenting wildlife in the field, but I would have to hire someone to create one. I have no knowledge or experience with running a business, so if the site ever gets to the point where there is a revenue stream and I can hire a few paid employees, I would have to consult or hire someone to handle that side of operations. That's getting too far ahead of things though. Revenue is not the primary goal of the site, and I will continue running it as a hobby regardless of what comes about on that front.

## Conclusion

A park is not nature in its purest form. It is not completely wild or untamed. But it is a portal through which we can be introduced to nature and come to understand it on our own terms. I hope that Parks of Pinellas will generate interest in the natural spaces of the county where there was none before, and encourage those people who are already involved. Hopefully this platform will encourage preservation, awareness, discussion and enjoyment of the parks. If it is successful here in Pinellas, the same model might be applied in other places.