

EDITORIALS

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Let's Try Again to Buy Singular Cockroach Key

Gus Muench is one of those dedicated citizens who puts energy behind his convictions. And that is to the good fortune of area residents. For Muench is convinced Tampa Bay must be saved.

The General Telephone Co. supervisor devotes endless hours to exploring the bay, researching issues, writing newspapers, calling politicians, questioning bureaucrats — opposing projects harmful to the bay and proposing programs to help it. His latest bay idea merits serious state and local attention.

Muench wants to revive public efforts to buy Cockroach Key, the 10-acre mangrove island on which an Indian mound rises 35-feet above the bay.

The island is a valuable archeological site. The mound was probably made by the Timucuan Indians between 700 to 1500 A.D., and is evidence of how fish-rich the bay was before enduring the ravages of dredge and fill, pollution and overfishing. The huge mound is composed of discarded oyster, clam and conch shells. Scientists have found the mound also contains portions of 224 human skeletons, primitive tools and pottery. But the island is privately owned and receives no state supervision.

it to become a state wilderness waterway, a protected area where visitors can fish, boat, canoe, harvest shellfish and enjoy the bay's beauty.

Most of the waterway is contained in either the Cockroach Bay or Terra Ceia State Aquatic Preserves. But the aquatic preserve designation, while providing some safeguards, does not prevent development.

The only sure method of preserving that important mangrove coastline is to buy it. That's a tall order, but there is no reason why much of the waterway could not be brought under public ownership if the state, Hillsborough and Manatee counties, and various private conservation groups resolved to do it.

Consider how Pinellas County preserved the Gateway Tract, a 699-acre stretch of mangrove forest between the Gandy and Howard Frankland bridges. Pinellas residents voted in 1980 to tax themselves an extra 25 cents for every \$1,000 of assessed property for two years to fund the purchase. In 1984 the Pinellas County Commission was able to buy the site for \$2.9 million. A state program for endangered lands reimbursed the county for half that amount.

The same tactics, on a larger scale, could be attempted in saving the lush marine habitat in South Hillsborough and North Manatee counties.



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Cockroach Key was once on the Conservation and Recreational Lands list of sites the state sought to preserve. But Florida officials and the shell mound owner could not agree on a price and it was dropped from the list. The state should try again, for the island has importance beyond its archeological significance.

Muench envisions the Cockroach Key purchase as the start of a comprehensive effort to preserve the stretch of shoreline running south from Cockroach Bay to the Bickel State Park Memorial in Manatee County. Bickel State Park, in appropriate symmetry, also contains a large Indian mound. With the exceptions of the Port Manatee facilities and the Skyway Bridge, the 14-mile waterway remains largely the kind of mangrove wilderness the Timucuan Indians fished. It is the most important marine life spawning ground in the bay, a nursery for snook, trout, and numerous other species. Muench wants

There will be obstacles. Obviously, the purchase would take many years. Some lands may be too expensive and some owners may not be willing to sell. And Tampa Electric Co. owns property practically in the middle of that fragile coastline where it plans to build its next power plant, though that project could be decades away. Any land-buying program will have to deal with such factors pragmatically. After all, we do want TECO to meet our future power needs, though we hope a less-sensitive site is found for the plant. Regardless, acquiring a substantial section of that vital waterway will do much to ensure the future vitality of the bay.

Recently Muench took his two sons, ages 11 and 12, on a two-day canoe trip from Madira Bickel State Park Memorial to Cockroach Key. He returned talking glowingly of how they had experienced the bay together — its wildlife, fishing, storms, tangled life-rich mangroves and beautiful sunsets. Those are the kind of profound pleasures Muench believes should be preserved for our descendents. So do we.

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Gus Muench and sons Gus Jr. and Sam on waterway near Cockroach Key