

Protect what we Have, Before it's too Late

There's been a lot of information bandied about by various exotic removal groups, that seem to be accepted by many, as a basic truth. We're told that the Australian pine is an aggressive, unrelenting invasive that has been taking over Florida as it uncontrollably destroys our state's pristine beauty. We're lead to believe that if we take our eyes off Australian pines for even a short time, they will infiltrate and displace any and all native vegetation that gets in their way. They have been labeled as shoreline eroders, sea turtle nesting inhibitors, wildlife habitat diminishers, natural habitat destroyers and on and on and on. The reality is, that although some of what removal proponents say, may be true for some areas of the state, under some circumstances, little of what they say, really applies to the National Historic Landmark at Fort Taylor.

There are no pines on the beach at Fort Zach, so they aren't contributing to shoreline erosion. Since there are no pines on the beach, even if there were turtles that wanted to nest, which there aren't, the pines wouldn't be in their way. The sound of birds is evident at the park throughout the day, as our majestic pines, which are 2-4 times taller than most native trees, stand as a marker for migrating birds. If the birds are not satisfied by the ample food supply of the pines, they can visit the native hammock which is already established at the park or they can fly to other areas in Key West to feed, such as the Botanical Gardens and the Indigenous Park. Key West and Sunset Key do not have a pine problem, so the pines are not encroaching on the closest habitats, while the prevailing water currents would appear to send any water bound seeds

away from the Great White Heron Preserve, which is located northeast of Key West.

As for the perceived invasiveness of the pines, removal proponents would have us believe that these trees spring up uncontrollably overnight. That if they are allowed to remain in Key West, at any given moment, a massive number of pine seeds and/or seedlings can somehow take over an area, destroying any habitat that gets in their way. The reality is that

Australian pines do not propagate so rapidly, it's a relatively slow process and a seedling can still be pulled out by hand when it is a year or two old. When the pines were originally planted in Florida over 100 years ago, they were allowed to spread unchallenged for almost a century. Had there been even a modicum of attention put into containing them, spreading could have been controlled, as it currently is at Fort Zach. Even though botanists consider Australian pines an invasive species, they cannot encroach on a habitat as long as the habitat is monitored.

Let's look at some of the benefits of the pines that are too frequently ignored. These trees are very salt tolerant and have managed to withstand the challenges of Keys coastal weather for over 40 years. Unlike most of the denser native shade trees, the height and airiness of Australian pines filter sunlight rather than inhibit it. Unlike the staid silence of native trees, the breeze singing through pine branches treats one to a concert of natural sound that buffers against the ever present noise of the surroundings. Australian pines don't require watering, so they don't contribute to water shortages. Sand spurs won't grow under Australian pines, so they don't need to be stopped with poisons. Pines don't drop leaves that require continual maintenance as natives do. The soft blanket of leaves that pines do drop is so conducive to running barefoot, that you rarely see children with shoes on, when they are under the pines. One only has to walk into the picnic area of Fort Zach to experience the peace and grandeur of nature, at its finest. No wonder so many Key Westers are upset. Upset that exotic rremoval proponents are pursuing the removal of pine

trees that have become so endeared to us.

Fort Zach, 1 of 159 state parks in Florida, comprises 56 acres of the 723,000 acres in Florida's park system. That's less than one hundredth of one percent of Florida's park lands. However, it's 1.5% of Key West's 3700 acres and, probably 10-15%, or even more, of the usable public green space on our island (that 3700 acres includes parking lots, streets, airports, salt ponds, buildings and non-public properties). Fort Zach's 56 acres are very, very important to Key Westers yet this small 56 acre tract is almost insignificant when compared to the total size of the park system and the 42,108,160 acres that make up the state of Florida.

Can natives replace the pines - perhaps? Would the park ever be the same again - absolutely not. The natives at Indigenous Park and the Botanical Gardens are wonderful, but their scale is different, the sense of airiness is different, their sounds are different, they don't filter light - they block it, their leaves need to be cleaned up, they need water - the pines don't. These are the basic truths. So don't be fooled by biased half truths that don't pertain to our situation and don't respect our unique needs. Stand up now and be counted. Protect what we have, before it's too late. The pines work for us, let's keep them for generations to come.

Pines are already being removed at a rate of 10% a year to grade and enlarge the beach and to make room for a huge 1000 square foot shelter for group functions, such as weddings and private parties. Attend the state's presentation on October 15 to learn the facts. **Monday, Oct. 15, 7 pm, Harvey Government Center, 1200 Truman Avenue** saveourpines.com saveourpines@mac.com

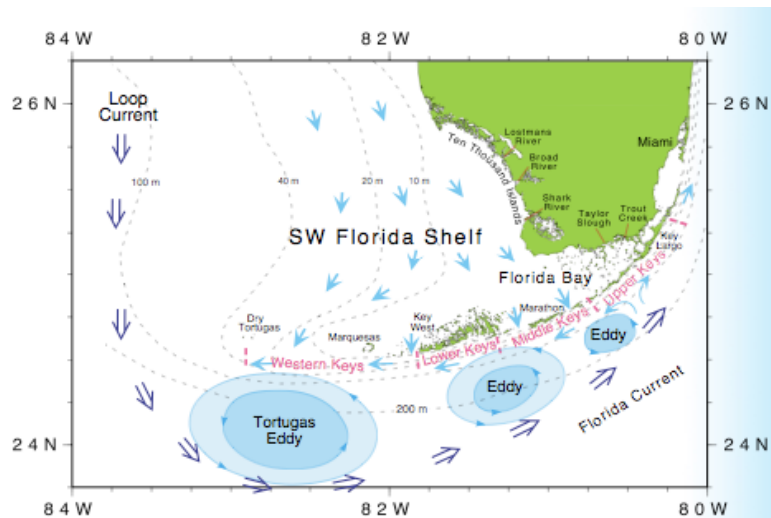


Figure 1. Schematic representation of the average flow patterns in the south Florida recirculation system that connects the different subregions. The arrows denote the directions of ocean currents; the double arrows show the flow of the Loop Current into the Florida Current.

Paid for by SAVE OUR PINES, a non-profit group