DEFENDING THE CAMPUS NATURAL AREA AND TEACHING LABORATORY
by Prof. Francis E. ('Jack") Putz

Apologize in advance if I seem a bit down-trodden---with developers holding sway in the county and military instead of diplomatic solutions being the new world order, it obviously isn't a good time to be a liberal environmentalist. Today, instead of being out in the forest training the new generation of naturalists and field researchers, I am here defending what shouldn't need defense. Frankly, I am appalled that the option of building a road through the Campus Natural Area and Teaching Laboratory is even being considered.

I am a field biologist and teach field biology courses. In my 22 years at UF, the destinations of my field trips have changed. We don't go out to the forests and wetlands of Sugarfoot Hammock---now Oaks Mall. The old fields of what is now Royal Plaza on University Avenue and Butler Plaza on Archer Road were also biologically rich and convenient field trip destinations for my courses and field trips run by Archie Carr, Peter Feinsinger, Jack Ewel and many others. I feel like an old man, bemoaning the losses in the name of Progress and Development (note the upper case letters---I'm trying to be politically correct in the modern sense). Well, in any even, about 10 years ago, I started using what in 1994 became the Natural Area and Teaching Laboratory for research and teaching, about which Tom Walker has already spoken. I should note that the award winning Stormwater Ecological Enhancement Project (SEEP) grew out of a project in one of my classes, as have several research projects that have been published or are underway.

The 44 acres of NATL includes a diversity of representative habitat types. Unfortunately, the best developed examples of the most threatened habitats are directly in the path of the proposed road.
AIR PHOTO of NATL
When we were inventorying the flora of the area, with its total now at 363 species of vascular plants, we worked from the north end southwards. We thought we were reaching an asymptote—getting close to the total, when we were down about half way towards to southern boundary. Then we hit the SW corner, and we started to encounter dozens of new species. This trend continued, as we moved from west to east along the southern boundary.
BIG TREE
Not only were there additional species, we were getting into vegetation with better structure, both the sandhill on the western side, and the hammock towards the east. The largest trees in the area are along the road corridor. We haven't done a complete inventory, but in the 20 x 20 m plots that we have been monitoring since 1997, there are some really impressive trees, including huge longleaf pines, and, even more impressive, some of the nicest swamp chestnut oaks I've ever seen—also known as basket oaks because the wood splits so nicely to make picnic baskets, this species is a good indicator of nutrient-rich and well watered sites.

PATH THROUGH HAMMOCK

Here the overburden of Pleistocene sands is thin, limestone outcrops near the surface, and clay lenses perch the water table—we haven't yet done a full soil analysis, but I believe that some of these clays are phosphatic, which explains the tree diversity and growth rates in the hammock plots. Amazing that within 100 m there is such habitat diversity, from xeric sandhill to super mesic hammock. The hammock needs protection, whereas the longleaf pine sandhill vegetation needs active management, which we have underway.

FIRE

The diversity of habitats, and the diversity of management needs, is one of the reasons that the NATL is so critical to our teaching program at UF. It's no wonder that the area figures in so prominently in the Conservation Element of UF's Master Plan. And no management technique is more important to understand than controlled burns, such as the one you see here. Conducting a burn at the NATL is no small feat—what with its surroundings of roads and hospitals, but we are doing it. And the impacts of active management are becoming obvious—we're seeing increased flowering of native herbs, removal of the dense litter that accumulated during a few decades of fire suppression, is promoting regeneration, and the whole aspect of the area is changing. There aren't many campuses in the world where students can get experience with controlled burns.

FLOODED SINKHOLE

And then just a few minute's walk away, is another world, a world of bluestem palms around sinkholes and an overstory of a dozen different species of hardwoods. All of this along the road right-of-way, through an area that is classified as "hydrologically sensitive" according to UF's Stormwater Management Master Plan. I don't even want to consider the collateral damage of a road passing through this area---I'm already too disappointed that the proposal has gotten this far. But, disappointed as I am, I will join what I suspect will be the majority of staff, faculty, and students in working to avoid damage to the NATL. Hopefully plans for this damage will stop here, and so will I, and pass the microphone to Professor Mark Brown.