

Coconut Point Sanctuary Public Access Plan

Site Summary

The Coconut Point Sanctuary is a 61-acre site comprised of several non-contiguous parcels located both east and west of State Road A1A in unincorporated Melbourne Beach, Brevard County, Florida. The sanctuary is directly adjacent to other conservation lands, including parcels managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Brevard County Parks and Recreation. The Coconut Point Sanctuary contains a 1-mile loop trail on the west side of A1A that winds from the bike path along A1A, out to an overlook on the Indian River Lagoon, and back to the bike path. Parking for the trail, along with public restrooms, are provided directly across from the hiking trail at the Ponce de Leon beach access managed by Brevard County Parks. The site is bordered by private property to the south and other government managed conservation and/or recreation parcels to the north. The majority of the Sanctuary consists of coastal strand with smaller areas of maritime hammock and tidal swamp approaching the shores of the Indian River Lagoon.

Passive Recreation Definition

To the extent they do not interfere with biological management goals, EEL sanctuaries provide a range of passive recreation opportunities for the public. As a general guideline for EEL Program management decisions, passive recreation is defined as, “a recreational type of use, level and combination of uses that do not individually, or collectively, degrade the resource values, biological diversity, and aesthetic or environmental qualities of a site.”

Before developing a site public access plan, staff conducts a Public Access Site Assessment. From this assessment, the types and extent of activities can be determined with the goal to balance human use with the protection of natural resources. Items considered during the assessment include, environmental, cultural, recreational and educational resources, stakeholder interests, potential conflicts, universal access, connections to other recreational resources, and potential management and/or maintenance conflicts and constraints.

Activities that allow for the quiet enjoyment of nature are conducive to EEL Program goals. Common activities on EEL sanctuaries are hiking, biking, kayaking, (catch and release?) fishing, and equestrian use. Activities and uses that are generally not allowed on EEL sanctuaries without permit include, but are not limited to: motorized vehicles, smoking, overnight use, commercial use, hunting / shooting sports, removal of plants or animals, relocating plants or animals, remote control and unmanned aerial vehicles, and pets.

Public Access Site Assessment

During the Public Access Site Assessment, it was noted that the Coconut Point Sanctuary is a Category II Site as defined in EEL Program’s *Sanctuary Management Manual*. The Sanctuary has a 1 mile trail with two trailheads each of which provides information about the site and maps. In addition, there are 8 interpretive panels scattered throughout the site providing information on the history, management and

flora/fauna. The EEL Program runs several camera traps on the Sanctuary to quantify visitation, track animals and to assess inappropriate activities. The trail boasts nearly 3,400 visitors a year. Due to the narrow and winding trail conditions, low branches as well as wet and sandy areas along the trail it is deemed only suitable for hiking. Mountain bikers occasionally use the site and have caused rutting and damage along the trail in addition to occasionally “running up” on hikers at high speed. We have also seen instances of trail widening and clearing to better accommodate mountain bikers. Camera traps have captured individuals using the site after hours and in some cases engaged in illegal activities and vandalism. Two cameras have been vandalized requiring staff to go to hardened cameras in some locations. Staff are working with law enforcement to address these issues. The main parcels of the sanctuary, through which the trail runs, is bisected by a dirt road which leads to the Hubbs Seaworld Research Institute which sits on an outparcel along the Indian River Lagoon. This road is often used by individuals to access the sanctuary after hours. Staff has recently installed several no parking signs along the road and are working with local law enforcement to discourage after hours use. Camera traps have also documented numerous cases of individuals bringing dogs onto the sanctuary, often off leash, despite numerous signs at the trail heads and along the trail indicating that dogs are not allowed.

The relatively small size of the site and planned trail, sandy and wet soils support hiking and nature observation as permitted activities, but do not support bicycles. There is a raised overlook along the shore of the Indian River Lagoon which has become a popular fishing location. No additional recreational assets are planned.

Recreational Uses and Amenities

The adjacent Ponce de Leon park, operated by Brevard County Parks and Recreation, will serve as a trailhead, with parking and restrooms. A non-lighted cross-walk is available for guests to cross A1A to access the trail which is located on the west side of A1A. A kiosk is located at the two points of access to the trail available from the bike path that runs along A1A and these kiosks include maps and other information of interest to visitors. The trail layout was designed in conjunction with fire and environmental management plans, so as to minimize conflicts and maintenance constraints. The relatively short trail traverses coastal strand, maritime hammock and tidal areas that are conducive to hiking, but not bicycling. No ADA access is planned at this time due to the considerable resources required and the environmental impacts to the site.

Environmental Education Opportunities

Access to the trail located within the sanctuary and the adjacent Ponce de Leon beach access offer opportunities for visitors to walk from the ocean to the lagoon through dune, coastal strand, maritime hammock and mangrove habitats. Interpretive trail signage topics available along the trail include habitat restoration, fire management and natural history.