

Shifting Sands

By Sandy Colbert

The natural history of Egmont Key goes back 10,000 years to the time of the ice ages when it changed from an island in the middle of the Hillsborough River to an island in the middle of Tampa Bay. The island's long isolation from the mainland allowed for the development of several unique sub-species of plants and reptiles and shielded it from human intrusion.

But in spite of its isolation perhaps no other Florida state park has been impacted by man more than Egmont Key. Since it was first visited by the Spanish in 1579 until today, the island's native vegetation has been stripped and replaced by exotics, its native wildlife disseminated and its beaches have eroded to an extent unprecedented in historical times.

In 1834, Major Francis Dade hunted deer on Egmont Key and a soldier wrote home to his mother describing the tall cedars and live oak that covered the island. During the next 70 years all the oaks and cedars disappeared. They fell victim to loggers who stripped the island for its valuable timber, to the army for fire wood and other uses by those stationed there during the Seminole and Civil Wars, and to mother nature, in the hurricanes that swept over the island.

When Ft. Dade was established in 1898 to protect Tampa from Spanish invasion, what ever remained of the island's native plant and animal communities was quickly destroyed. Vegetation was cleared for the over 70 building that were erected on the island. The native animals were soon replaced by horses, dogs, and cats.

By the time Egmont Key became a national wildlife refuge under the management of the US Fish and Wildlife Service in 1974, even the islands small rodents and nesting birds had been eliminated by the feral cats that roamed the island. The box and gophers tortoises have survived and perhaps in some quiet dark place, its mole skinks.

The development of the Tampa Bay area in the 1950's and early 1960's began to alter the shore lines of the land surrounding Egmont Key. Bays were filled in, bridges built, shipping channels deepened and shorelines hardened by seawalls. This altered current flow and affected sediment supply. The island began to erode at an ever increasing rate. Over 800,000 cu. yards of beach have been lost since 1940. What was once a prime nesting area for sea turtles has now been reduced to a few feet above high tide.

In 1989, US Fish and Wildlife Service joined with the State of Florida to co-manage the island as a State Park. In 1991, The Egmont Key Alliance was incorporated as a Citizens Support Organization to assist the Park Manager with the rejuvenation of the island.

With that goal in mind, the Alliance set out to do something about restoring the native plant and animal communities of Egmont Key, and to stem the ever increasing erosion.

To date, we have established an off shore sea grass protection zone and begun the removal of all exotic plant species from the island. The Alliance worked in cooperation with the US Fish & Wildlife Service's to increase the size of the off limits zone of the wildlife refuge while preserving public access to the safe boat anchorage on the south east side of the island.

We have also been successful in encouraging local governments to initiate geological studies on the dynamics of the beach erosion. No such studies had ever been done on Egmont Key in the past. The State of Florida selected a costal engineering firm to develop short and long term solutions to the erosion problems that will protect the historical structures and stem or reverse the loss of the recreational beach.

In 2001, utilizing recommendations from the engineering study, the Alliance was successful in having Egmont Key designated as a suitable place to receive beach quality sand from dredging projects in and around Tampa Bay. Working in cooperation with the Tampa Bay Estuary Program, the Agency on Bay Management, the Department of Environmental Protection, the City of St Petersburg and the US Army Corps of Engineers, the Alliance was able to secure over 600,000 cu. yards of sand from St. Petersburg's Bayboro Harbor dredging project to be placed on the northwest shore of Egmont Key .The new sand beach offers short term protection to the historical structures from erosion while providing acceptable nesting areas for sea turtles and local and migratory birds. Successful hatchings of both bird and reptile allied the fears of some naturalists that wildlife would not use the new beach. Encouraged by nature's adaptability, the Alliance believes sand replacement is a viable interim solution to the island's erosion problems.

While Egmont Key is still in need of much tender loving care, the beginnings of restoring the island's natural environments have begun and the Alliance will continue to work with public and private entities to restore, preserve and protect this unique island in the mouth of Tampa Bay.